

**A Case Study of  
Feminist Comedy in  
Muriel Spark's *Robinson***

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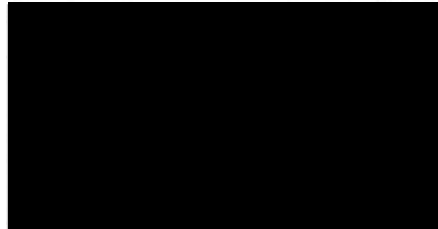
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The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.



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## ABSTRACT

Muriel Spark's comedy is unnerving, thought-provoking and under-researched. Few studies have inquired into the literary and/or feminist impulses behind the ubiquitous humour of this author's twenty-two novels. Advancing a fresh interpretation of one of Spark's least discussed novels, this thesis aims to establish a deep and detailed understanding of how comedy functions in her work. Generally considered a difficult, inferior follow-up to her much lauded debut as a novelist, *Robinson* has received little critical attention. But reading this novel in the light of recent literary and cultural critical approaches to women's comedy and feminist humour, this understudied, undervalued novel emerges as a profoundly feminist work by an obliquely and uniquely feminist author. Its comedy and humour allow both heroine and author to resist insidious masculine takeovers, critique patriarchal systems which disallow female participation in literature and culture and, finally, suggest an alternative, better future for womankind, mankind and humankind. Though rarely read through a feminist lens, this thesis aims to (re)consider the questions of whether and in what way Spark may be understood as a feminist author. Additionally, it gestures towards how a similar approach might prove fruitful in reading other Spark texts, as well as other female comic texts.



**FIGURE 1: A MAP OF ROBINSON**

## INTRODUCTION

Written in 1958, Muriel Spark's *Robinson* begins with a map that echoes two of its inter-texts, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *Swiss Family Robinson* (1812), as well as numerous texts of the Robinsonade tradition. The curlicue typeface, the rough sketch of the novel's island confines and the notation of various sites of narrative importance on the island of Robinson all mimic the opening conventions characteristic of this genre. But Spark's map contains a joke, shaped as it is like a human body. To ensure this joke is not missed, the author has helpfully, and rather gleefully, labelled the spread limbs of the body: "THE NORTH ARM", "THE SOUTH ARM", "THE NORTH LEG" and "THE WEST LEG". The head is likewise marked, with transparent literalness, "THE HEADLANDS".<sup>1</sup> A secret tunnel runs through the heart, a live crater sits in the place of the liver and sharks inhabit the waters around the figure's crotch, offering obvious sexual connotations.<sup>2</sup> On the upper and right side of the body, Vasco da Gama's Bay could be said to represent the conquering, colonising masculine impulse. The lower and left side of the body, labelled Pomegranate Bay, could conversely symbolise the more spiritual and sensual aspects of the feminine. It is unclear, however, whether this body is male, female or androgynous. It is also unclear whether the overturned figure is engaged in some kind of carnivalesque jig or if it is in fact a slain corpse.

This thesis tracks the multiple meanings hinted at by Spark's pictorial précis. Providing the first priming giggle, this key aspect of the peritext indicates that the

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<sup>1</sup> Muriel Spark, *Robinson* (London: Macmillan, 1958; London: Penguin Books, 1964), 6. Citations refer to Penguin edition.

<sup>2</sup> Alan Bold, *Muriel Spark* (London, New York: Methuen, 1986), 43.

novel straddles both literary and, as this thesis will argue, comic territory. In it, Spark points directly to a genre of fiction she intends to parody with both affection and criticism. With this opening illustration, she also succinctly indicates that the novel will offer some exploration of the meanings of masculinity, femininity and humanity. It suggests that issues of ownership, appropriation and colonisation are to be significant in the pages that follow. On one hand, the flattened human outline suggests the reduction of a human being to a stereotype or caricature and, on the other, it suggests the chalk outline of a modern detective story.<sup>3</sup> It immediately places the reader in the active, investigatory mindset of a detective in pursuit of clues, of answers and, ultimately, of justice. Rather more obliquely, this map implies that Spark's novel is set in a borderland, a liminal landscape, a self-contained threshold space in which negotiations between the real and the surreal, the historical and mythical, the peripheral and central can take place. The paratext (of which the peritext is an aspect) is viewed by Gérard Genette as a threshold offering the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back.<sup>4</sup> A zone of transaction as well as transition, the paratext gives the author the opportunity to influence the reader's perception of their text.<sup>5</sup> Spark's cunning use of the peritext of *Robinson* provides a moment of twisted postmodern reflexivity in that she subliminally influences her reader's perception of her work before it has properly begun, scoring the first victory for female authorship in a text in which female protagonist and male antagonist will do battle for the right to write. She is the first to exert influence upon another, her

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<sup>3</sup> Irena Książczowska, "The Missing Body: Muriel Spark's *Robinson* as a Mock-Detective Story," in *The Body. Readings in English and American Literature and Culture*, eds. Ilona Dobosiewicz and Jacek Gutorow (Opole, Poland: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Opolskiego, 2009), 1, [https://s3.amazonaws.com/academia.edu.documents/31435808/Ksiezczowska\\_The\\_missing\\_body\\_in\\_Robinson.pdf?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAIWOWYYGZ2Y53UL3A&Expires=1539063455&Signature=G5d%2BpJVhRKAIPSYDJBxz7POWGrA%3D&response-content-disposition=inline%3B%20filename%3DThe\\_Missing\\_Body\\_Muriel\\_Spark\\_s\\_Robinson.pdf](https://s3.amazonaws.com/academia.edu.documents/31435808/Ksiezczowska_The_missing_body_in_Robinson.pdf?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAIWOWYYGZ2Y53UL3A&Expires=1539063455&Signature=G5d%2BpJVhRKAIPSYDJBxz7POWGrA%3D&response-content-disposition=inline%3B%20filename%3DThe_Missing_Body_Muriel_Spark_s_Robinson.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 2, [https://kimdhillon.files.wordpress.com/2014/05/genette\\_gerard\\_paratexts\\_thresholds\\_of\\_interpretation.pdf](https://kimdhillon.files.wordpress.com/2014/05/genette_gerard_paratexts_thresholds_of_interpretation.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.



relationship with her reader in this way mimicking her characters' various struggles to gain and influence allies. Finally, in conferring upon this space of transition such a wealth of meanings, Spark indicates that, like so much of her oeuvre, *Robinson* is a text that is ultimately concerned with processes, individual and collective, of transition and transformation.

*Robinson* is not considered one of Spark's finest novels. Its infinitely interpretable quality has contributed to its reputation as a difficult and inferior follow-up to her much lauded debut as a novelist. Frequently overlooked in studies of the author's oeuvre, Spark's second novel has been praised for being original but blamed for being unnecessarily vague and mystifying.<sup>6</sup> In this thesis, I will advance a fresh interpretation of this novel supported by literary and cultural critical approaches to female comedy and feminist humour. This interpretation will concentrate largely on Spark's comic heroine/anti-heroine, January Marlow, and her relationship with the male inhabitants of the island of Robinson. As with many of Spark's novels, it is difficult to detect where January ends and Spark herself begins. This thesis therefore tracks the dual journey of author and protagonist as they use comedy and humour to resist insidious masculine takeovers, disrupt patriarchal systems which disallow them participation in literature and culture, create an independent and artistic self and, finally, suggest an alternative, better future for womankind, mankind and humankind. Though she is rarely understood as a feminist writer, throughout this thesis I will outline how Spark uses comedy to launch an attack on masculine-inscribed literary canons and conventions, claiming a creative, literary space for herself, her writerly heroine and her fellow female writers. As such, this thesis seeks to address a glaring gap that exists in criticism on Spark. It aims firstly to offer an original, thorough

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<sup>6</sup> Carol B. Ohmann, "Muriel Spark's *Robinson*," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 8, no. 1 (Fall 1965): 70, Taylor & Francis Online.

analysis of an understudied, underestimated text through a demonstration of how Sparkian comedy functions in one of her dense, bewildering novels. As a single case study, this thesis also gestures towards how such an approach might prove fruitful in reading other Spark texts, as well as other texts by female comic writers. Lastly, I aim in this thesis to (re)consider the questions of whether and in what way Spark may be understood as a feminist author.

This year marked the hundredth anniversary of Muriel Spark's birth, prompting a multitude of new editions and reflective tributes to flow into public forums. It consequently seems like a pertinent time to reconsider literary interpretations of this author, incorporating, not just feminist criticism that has emerged since the advent of her novelistic career, but also the interdisciplinary insights offered by Humour Studies research into the creation and appreciation of comedy and humour by different gender groups. Though a celebrated staple of Spark's work, her comedy is rarely scrutinised as a legitimate literary technique. Despite the author's reputation for producing consistently funny literature, the majority of the scholarship on her work focuses on either her religious conversion<sup>7</sup> or narrative style.<sup>8</sup> This is perhaps

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<sup>7</sup> See Malcolm Bradbury, "Muriel Spark's Fingernails," *Critical Quarterly* 14, no. 3 (1972): 241–50, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8705.1972.tb02059.x>; Bryce Christensen, "'The Latter End of Job': The Gift of Narrative in Muriel Spark's *The Only Problem* and *The Comforters*," *Renascence* 54, no. 2 (2002): 136–47, ProQuest; Rodney Stenning Edgecombe, *Vocation and Identity in the Fiction of Muriel Spark* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990); David Lodge, "The Uses and Abuses of Omniscience: Method and Meaning in Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*," in *The Novelist at the Crossroads: And Other Essays on Fiction and Criticism* (London: Routledge, 1971), 119–44; Allan Massie, "Calvinism and Catholicism in Muriel Spark," in *Muriel Spark: An Odd Capacity for Vision*, ed. Alan Bold (London: Vision Press, 1984), 94–107; Jennifer Lynn Randisi, *On Her Way Rejoicing: The Fiction of Muriel Spark* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1991); Martin Stannard, "Nativities: Muriel Spark, Baudelaire, and the Quest for Religious Faith," *The Review of English Studies* 55, no. 218 (2004): 91–105, [www.jstor.org/stable/3661392](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3661392); Ruth Whittaker, *The Faith and Fiction of Muriel Spark* (London: Macmillan, 1982).

<sup>8</sup> See James Bailey, "Salutary Scars: The 'Disorienting' Fictions of Muriel Spark," *Contemporary Women's Writing* 9, no. 1 (March 2015): 34–52, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cww/vpu032>; Preeti Bhatt, *Experiments in Narrative Technique in the Novels of Muriel Spark, the Most Internationally Recognized Scottish Writer in the Post-war Era* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2011); Anne L. Bower, "The Narrative Structure of Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*," *The Midwest Quarterly* 31, no. 4 (1990): 488–98, ProQuest; Peter Robert Brown, "'There's Something about Mary': Narrative and Ethics in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*," *Journal of Narrative Theory* 36, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 228–53, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30224647>; John Holloway, "Narrative Structure and Text Structure: Isherwood's *A Meeting by the River* and Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*," *Critical Inquiry* 1, no. 3 (1975): 581–604, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1342832>; Joseph Hynes, "Muriel Spark and the

because, to some, “funny literature” seems like an oxymoron. Often considered a low or trivial form, comedy has classically been constructed as the foolish, inferior antithesis of tragedy.<sup>9</sup> When it has been studied seriously, masculine humour has generally been considered universal while women’s creation or perception of humour has been widely ignored.<sup>10</sup> With the cultural explosion of second-wave feminism, however, and the wealth of academic enquiry this cultural shift provoked, a strong interest emerged in women’s writing, women’s language, and with this, women’s humour. Such ground-breaking work has provided better tools with which to discuss the sort of strange comic literature Spark produced.

Rather than attempting, therefore, a potentially ineffective bid to understand female comedy through classic comic theories written by men, I will in this thesis draw on feminist understandings of comedy and humour by Regina Barreca, Judy Little, Nancy Walker and Audrey Bilger. Though I will touch very briefly on M. M. Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque, I will in general avoid the well-established comic theories of Aristotle, Kant, Freud, Bergson and their fraternity. Instead, I will supplement my argument with feminist criticism by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Patricia Meyer Spacks, amongst others. Contemporary research from the burgeoning field of Humour Studies will also provide ancillary theory and language with which to better comprehend Sparkian comedy. As an author famous for her “funny literature”, Spark is a prime candidate for this kind of re-reading, particularly since much of the scholarship on her work thus

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Oxymoronic Vision,” in *Contemporary British Women Writers: Narrative Strategies*, ed. Robert E. Hosmer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1993) 161–83; Ian Rankin, “Surface and Structure: Reading Muriel Spark’s *The Driver’s Seat*,” *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 15, no. 2 (1985): 146–55, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30225122>; Judy Sproxton, “The Women of Muriel Spark: Narrative and Faith,” *New Blackfriars* 73, no. 863 (1992): 432–40, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43249186>.

<sup>9</sup> Lisa Merrill, “Feminist Humor: Rebellious and Self-Affirming,” in *Last Laughs: Perspectives on Women and Comedy*, ed. Regina Barreca (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1988), 272.

<sup>10</sup> Seveda Caliskan, “Is There Such a Thing as Women’s Humor?,” *American Studies International* 33, no. 2 (1995): 49–50, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41279344>.

far has failed to adequately grasp the subversive potential of her comic voice. Specialising in a form deemed trivial and a domain viewed as masculine has ensured that little critical attention has been paid to Spark's skilful, multivalent use of comedy. Her idiosyncratic brand of female comedy defies the literary labels required by many critics, possibly explaining why the reductive but comforting label of "Catholic writer" has proved so hard to shift in discussions of her work.<sup>11</sup> As such, this thesis will also avoid criticism fixated on this label, choosing instead to understand and extend scholarship which examines the intricate relationship between gender and humour featured throughout Spark's oeuvre.

Born Muriel Sarah Camberg, Spark's career spanned the latter half of the twentieth century and the first few years of the twenty-first. The publication of her first novel *The Comforters* (1957) came shortly after her conversion to the Roman Catholic faith, an event that dominates much of the discussion of the author and her texts. Though best known for her novels, Spark's chosen form, from an early age, was poetry. She continued throughout her prolific life to write poetry, short stories and essays and to think of herself as a poet rather than a novelist.<sup>12</sup> Much like poetry, comedy often exhibits an expert, meticulous and rebellious use of language. So it is perhaps unsurprising that this training ground enabled Spark, with her infinitely precise and playful manipulation of language, to create her own unique and profound form of comedy. Critics have had difficulty, however, building sustained and insightful analyses of this aspect of her work. "Spark attracts admirers rather than critics," Wily Maley notes, with "polite criticism" often neutralising her genuine radicalism.<sup>13</sup> This is no truer than in criticism concerning her comedy, which tends to either lavish praise

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<sup>11</sup> Bailey, "Salutary Scars," 35–37.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Hosmer, "An Interview with Dame Muriel Spark," *Salmagundi*, no. 146/147 (2005): 135, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40549783>.

<sup>13</sup> Wily Maley, "Not to Deconstruct? Righting and Deference in *Not to Disturb*," in *Theorizing Muriel Spark: Gender, Race, Deconstruction*, ed. Martin McQuillan (Basingstoke, U.K., New York: Palgrave, 2002), 170–71.

or offer excuses. Drew Milne's chapter on "Muriel Spark's Crimes of Wit" is perhaps emblematic of this critical difficulty in that it promises to scrutinise one aspect of Spark's comedy but without delivering great insight. He writes that the "[q]ualities of satirical wit are critical to the way her writing is entertaining, delightful and intelligent" but he cannot place Spark within a tradition of witty fiction since "such genealogies and comparisons do not quite capture the more darkly structural and critical qualities of Spark's wit".<sup>14</sup> Milne seems compelled to repeatedly classify Spark's wit as "literary" and her novels as "intelligent",<sup>15</sup> perhaps betraying some unease with the common perception of comedy as neither. Labelling her "an unlikely feminist", he suggests that Spark's feminism is as non-conformist as her comedy, "figured as the feminism of intelligent common sense rather than as feminist ideology critique".<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, discussions of Spark's comedy often become curtailed by or conflated with discussions of her feminism, or more likely, of her Catholicism. In his discussion of Spark's satire, Ian Gregson famously dubbed her "the least feminist of women writers" as she merely presents "her women characters as the equal of men in their compulsiveness".<sup>17</sup> For him, Spark is like many of her postmodern contemporaries in that she is preoccupied with power, with "social and cultural structures which belittle her characters and attenuate their freedom to act".<sup>18</sup> This, he proposes, is the source of her satire and the impetus behind her use of the dehumanising, objectifying, contemptuous mode of caricature.<sup>19</sup> No correlation is drawn between this theme in Spark's work and her feminism. The struggle between oppression and freedom, as well as her failure to conform to postmodern literary ideals, are instead attributed by

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<sup>14</sup> Drew Milne, "Muriel Spark's Crimes of Wit," in *The Edinburgh Companion to Muriel Spark*, eds. Michael Gardiner and Willy Maley (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 111–13.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 112, 114, 117, 118, 119, 120, 121.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>17</sup> Ian Gregson, *Character and Satire in Post-war Fiction* (New York, London: Continuum, 2006), 107.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 3, 100.

Gregson to a battle between Spark's humanist and Catholic principles.<sup>20</sup> On a similar note, Jennifer Randisi writes that, while "satire is the informing principle of Spark's work", her "satiric vision is contingent upon her theology".<sup>21</sup> Indeed, ascribing Spark's detached, satirical narrative voice to a God-like authorial identity is a common occurrence,<sup>22</sup> usually inspired by Malcolm Bradbury's influential 1972 essay in which he describes Spark's writing as exhibiting the indifferent moral manner of a (masculine) God.<sup>23</sup> Following Bradbury's cue, it became a customary critical practice to attribute Spark's comic detachment, her satirisation of human folly and absurd-ing of reality to a God-like authorial identity that reflected the Catholic concepts of predestination, punishment and redemption. Spark herself rejected this depiction when interviewed by Martin McQuillan in 1998.<sup>24</sup> She preferred to think of her authorial identity as immanent, anarchic and movable.<sup>25</sup> As this thesis will explore, this characterisation of Spark's comic voice is far more aligned with the theory that, as more marginal and seldom superior beings, women writers use comedy in an effort to invade institutions, overstep boundaries and alter inequitable cultures for the better.

Since 'humour' and 'comedy' are such significant terms for this thesis, it is necessary to pause here and properly define and differentiate between them. Despite a long history of theorising on the subject, comedy has traditionally been marginalised in Literary Studies. Moreover, the language with which to dissect and discuss female comedy and humour has arguably only become available in recent decades. Indeed, it is still under construction. As such, there seems to be no solid

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<sup>20</sup> Gregson, *Character and Satire*, 6.

<sup>21</sup> Jennifer L. Randisi, "Muriel Spark and Satire," in Bold, *Muriel Spark: An Odd Capacity for Vision*, 132–33.

<sup>22</sup> Bailey, "Salutary Scars," 37.

<sup>23</sup> Bradbury, "Muriel Spark's Fingernails," 241–50.

<sup>24</sup> Martin McQuillan, "'The Same Informed Air': An Interview with Muriel Spark," in McQuillan, *Theorizing Muriel Spark*, 218.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

consensus delineating comedy from humour or women's humour from other forms of humour, including feminist humour. Different theorists understand these categories in different ways. This thesis, in seeking simplicity and clarity, understands humour as spoken or performed acts by people in real social contexts or characters in fictional contexts, and comedy as an overarching term for the textual or literary strategies employed by an author. These performed acts and authorial strategies may, of course, overlap or be referred to differently by the various theorists I call upon.

Similarly murky is the distinction between women's humour and feminist humour, both of which – it is largely, though not universally, accepted – exist. Complicated by “constant qualification, rebuttal, and redefinition”,<sup>26</sup> discussions of female/feminist comedy or humour are generally preceded and somewhat impeded by the need to dismantle existing stereotypes and establish fresh frameworks regarding these supposedly incompatible categories.<sup>27</sup> Gail Finney begins her discussion with the oft posed question of whether women's comedy is “anything more than comedy by women?”.<sup>28</sup> Some understand women's humour as a form that addresses a female audience, one that affirms the female experience traditionally denigrated in comic discourses.<sup>29</sup> Revolving around shared experiences and conquered obstacles, women's humour is frequently understood as exhibiting an intimate and healing functionality.<sup>30</sup> It may express positive evaluations of women,

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<sup>26</sup> Regina Barreca, “‘Untamed and Unabashed’: Towards a Theory of Women and Humor in Literature,” in *Untamed and Unabashed: Essays on Women and Humor in British Literature* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1994), 15.

<sup>27</sup> Caliskan, “Is There Such a Thing as Women's Humor?,” 49.

<sup>28</sup> Gail Finney, “Unity in Difference?: An Introduction,” in *Look Who's Laughing: Gender and Comedy*, ed. Gail Finney (Langhorne, PA: Gordon and Breach, 1994), 11.

<sup>29</sup> Merrill, “Feminist Humor,” 275, 279.

<sup>30</sup> Helga Kotthoff, “Gender and Humor: The State of the Art,” *Journal of Pragmatics* 38, no. 1 (2006): 15, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2005.06.003>.

celebrating their strengths and capabilities and affirming their value and autonomy.<sup>31</sup> It can offer alternative modes of understanding or include tiny acts of revenge.<sup>32</sup> It can be a survival device, arising from oppression.<sup>33</sup> Or it can be self-deprecatory, turning inward on the self and confirming the opinion of the dominant culture,<sup>34</sup> which, research shows, still prefers to see womankind taken as a comic target.<sup>35</sup> But while traditional humour often targeted or still targets women, and some female humourists align with this tradition by turning their humour inward on themselves and their sex, feminist humour typically turns outward on the world, its beliefs, institutions and practices. Used in the service of political activism, feminist humour enables women to disrupt the reproduction of gender norms, expose gendered social structures and challenge socio-cultural notions of female deficiency.<sup>36</sup> As recent studies in workplace humour indicate, humour can be used either to reinforce existing hierarchies and boundaries or to equalise power relations, diffuse conflict and convert hostility.<sup>37</sup> The potential of humour to divide or include prompts Janet Bing to differentiate between “reinforcing humour” and “subversive humour”.<sup>38</sup> It is the latter that this thesis investigates. For it is the latter that has the ability to unthreateningly suggest new ideas to closed minds, disrupt ideas of “normal” and complicate essentialist notions of the sexes.<sup>39</sup> According to Bing, this is what feminist humour should do and usually does do. Ideally, feminist humour centralises women,

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<sup>31</sup> Mary Crawford, “On Conversational Humor,” in *Talking Difference: On Gender and Language* (London: SAGE Publications, 1997), 25, ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>33</sup> Gloria Kaufman, “Feminist Humor as a Survival Device,” *Regionalism and the Female Imagination* 3, no. 3 (1977): 78, quoted in Sevdal Caliskan, “Is There Such a Thing as Women’s Humor?,” *American Studies International* 33, no. 2 (1995): 58, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41279344>.

<sup>34</sup> Nancy A. Walker, *A Very Serious Thing: Women’s Humor and American Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 123.

<sup>35</sup> Jerry Palmer, “Gender and Humour,” in *Taking Humour Seriously* (London, New York: Routledge, 1993): 69, ProQuest eBook Central.

<sup>36</sup> Crawford, “On Conversational Humor,” 26.

<sup>37</sup> Janet Bing, “Is Feminist Humor an Oxymoron?,” *Women and Language* 27, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 24, ProQuest Central.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 30–31.



suggests alternatives and targets “absurd attitudes, ideas, beliefs and systems that keep females at a disadvantage”.<sup>40</sup>

The capacity to influence norms and restructure perceptions, Helga Kotthoff states, “communicates sovereignty, creative power and the freedom to intervene in the world”.<sup>41</sup> Such sovereignty, power and freedom have historically been unacceptable in women, although there are now “various signs of change in the gender politics of humour”.<sup>42</sup> The enduring myth of the humourless female is on the decline and women’s humour is becoming more visible and more effectively studied.<sup>43</sup> There does remain, however, an “almost complete exclusion of women humourists from the literary canon”.<sup>44</sup> Female writers with a comic bent are either marginalised as “trivial” or elevated to the status of “serious” writers.<sup>45</sup> Criticism on Spark can veer in either direction. Often, critics choose to contemplate and celebrate more serious literary elements than her astute comedy. Simultaneously, as Len Gutkin notes, “[f]requently accompanying identifications of Spark’s humor is the anxious suggestion that, appealing though it may be, such ‘lightness’ does not constitute the highest kind of novelistic seriousness.”<sup>46</sup> Where Spark’s comedy is not critically overlooked, it may be trivialised or misunderstood. Comedy by women has a long history of being trivialised, dismissed or misread in this way. Martin McQuillan suggests that Spark’s novels are “constantly misread” because they are “untimely”.<sup>47</sup> Working ahead of her time, he writes, has meant that academic criticism has proved

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<sup>40</sup> Bing, “Is Feminist Humor an Oxymoron?,” 28.

<sup>41</sup> Kotthoff, “Gender and Humour”, 5.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 4–5.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Caliskan, “Is There Such a Thing as Women's Humor?,” 49.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Len Gutkin, “Muriel Spark’s Camp Metafiction,” *Contemporary Literature* 58, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 55, Project MUSE.

<sup>47</sup> Martin McQuillan, “Introduction: ‘I Don’t Know Anything about Freud’: Muriel Spark Meets Contemporary Criticism,” in McQuillan, *Theorizing Muriel Spark*, 11.

“ill-equipped to deal with her postmodern poesis.”<sup>48</sup> According to Regina Barreca though, misinterpretation of female comic texts generally arises when they adhere neither to the conservative conventions of masculine comedy nor to the genteel, coy expectations of feminine wit.<sup>49</sup> Considered an act of aggression belonging to the male sex, female comic acts have been regarded as unfeminine and undesirable, if not impossible.<sup>50</sup> Women writers have been permitted to produce “gentle and conciliatory” comedy with “a desire to provide mild entertainment, a textual flirtation, a batting of the rhetorical eyelashes”, but they have not had license to produce the kind of challenging, angry, violent, transgressive brand of comedy Spark generates.<sup>51</sup> For Barreca, this kind of comedy is unabashedly political, grotesque, destructive and irate.<sup>52</sup> It is a way for women to channel feelings of anger and rebellion, to relieve frustrated intellectual and sexual desires,<sup>53</sup> to reclaim control over their lives and “gain perspective by ridiculing the implicit insanities of a patriarchal culture”.<sup>54</sup> “Such comedy,” she writes,

is risky. It is confrontational and boundary breaking since you walk away feeling angry even as you laugh. This sort of comedy does not do away with women’s feelings of powerlessness – instead it underscores the political nature of a woman’s role. It should make us more determined to change those aspects of our situation that confine us. It is comedy that inspires as well as entertains.<sup>55</sup>

Indeed, effecting cultural change seems to be the one defining principle of feminist humour that most theorists can agree upon. It is also the end point of this thesis. Though often read as a frustrating or baffling failing of this misread text, the various

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<sup>48</sup> McQuillan, “Introduction: ‘I Don’t Know Anything about Freud’,” 11.

<sup>49</sup> Regina Barreca, “Making Trouble: An Introduction,” in *New Perspectives on Women and Comedy*, ed. Regina Barreca (Philadelphia: Gordon and Breach, 1992), 4–5.

<sup>50</sup> Caliskan, “Is There Such a Thing as Women’s Humor?,” 49–50; Kotthoff, “Gender and Humor,” 14.

<sup>51</sup> Barreca, “Making Trouble,” 5.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Regina Barreca, “A Difference of Taste in Jokes’: Humor in *The Mill on the Floss*,” *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory* 3, no. 4 (1992): 292–93, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10436929208580089>.

<sup>54</sup> Barreca, “‘Untamed and Unabashed’,” 12.

<sup>55</sup> Regina Barreca, *They Used to Call Me Snow White...But I Drifted: Women’s Strategic Use of Humor* (New York: Viking Press, 1991), 14–15.

interpretative possibilities of *Robinson* will ultimately be understood in this thesis as a feminist strategy that encourages multiplicity, polyphony, diversity and hope. Spark's literary comedy encourages readers, not only to generate their own understandings of this strange, satirical narrative, but to turn their critical and creative minds on the world around them, inciting them to make it better.

In 1970, Spark delivered an address to the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters which gave insight into her use of comedy and the socio-cultural intervention she hoped it might activate. In it, she calls for an end to "the art and literature of sentiment and emotion" for it only "cheats us into a sense of involvement with life and society."<sup>56</sup> In their place, she adds, "I advocate the arts of satire and ridicule. [...] I see no other living art form of the future. Ridicule is the only honourable weapon we have left."<sup>57</sup> When it comes to any form of violence, she states, we should be educated to respond with ruthless mockery.<sup>58</sup> When facing racial injustice, absurd oppressions or the tyrannies of family life, she believes "the only effective art of our particular time is the satirical, the harsh and witty, the ironic and derisive."<sup>59</sup> The following thesis interrogates these arts, of which Spark is a singularly adept architect. I will explore in detail Spark's use of satire, ridicule, mockery, absurdity and irony, as well as other comic devices like parody, paronomasia, caricature and mask. Moreover, I will explore how this author uses these devices in a distinctly female way and with a distinctly feminist purpose.

I will begin, in chapter 1, by establishing the world of *Robinson* as a literal "man's world", a world of the Other. A world in itself, Robinson's island is patriarchal culture miniaturised then populated with caricatured male types that endlessly spout

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<sup>56</sup> Muriel Spark, "The Desegregation of Art," in *The Informed Air: Essays*, ed. Penelope Jardine (New York: New Directions, 2014), 80.

<sup>57</sup> Spark, "The Desegregation of Art," 80.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 79–81.

aphorisms, catchphrases and inaccurate idioms. These ventriloquistic caricatures provide a stark contrast to the linguistic skill which will prove so pivotal to the survival of Spark's heroine. They also serve to highlight the role language plays in processes of colonisation and control. Expanding on my introductory reading of Spark's map, I will briefly consider how the imperialist themes of *Robinson Crusoe* and *Swiss Family Robinson* are echoed in Spark's text in order to reinforce her critique of any authoritarian culture or figure that seeks to control those perceived as Other. The weapon deployed against such authoritarianism is a Sparkian staple – a female writer in possession of a transfiguring comic voice. In this opening chapter, I will introduce January as a writer and re-writer of literary and cultural myths, texts and traditions. Prompted by feminist criticism that links this character with magic, myth and materiality, I will consider how, with moments of mask and grotesquery, Spark invests January with a comic embodiment that flouts both conventional femininity and fixed notions of gender.

Moving on to acts of verbal and textual comic disruption, chapter 2 will analyse how January unsettles the masculine realm of Robinson with her humour while Spark mocks masculine traditions of literature with her satire and parody. Challenging not just literary but larger socio-cultural notions of femaleness, Spark ridicules literary myths of Woman that have impeded female authorship and, in doing so, ruptures the exclusionary boundaries around literary history and convention. Concentrating on January's verbal virtuosity, I will advance a secular, feminist understanding of Sparkian satire that draws on the ancient roots of the form and the long-standing association of women with oral culture, particularly with the debased sphere of gossip. In *Robinson*, the excluded language and underground conventions of female humour are brought by Spark into a literary context. By identifying and

understanding these conventions, a radically different viewpoint emerges of this author's infamous use of proleptic, analeptic, metaleptic and metafictional wordplay. Lastly, I will consider how female speechlessness and inept speech, adopted by a critical feminine persona, become for Spark's comic heroine strategies of protest and protection.

This thesis posits that comedy is more than merely disruptive; it aims to peer behind such comic acts to understand what may lie behind them. Thus in chapter 3, I will extend my thinking on female comic acts to propose they are equally creative in nature. In exploring how humour becomes a transformative device for the heroine of *Robinson*, I am working with the belief that the ultimate purpose of feminist comedy is change. This chapter will focus on the personal transformation of January Marlow and on reading *Robinson* as a parodic revisioning of creationism that clears space for a female creator. With her disobedient rewriting of the Genesis myth, Spark authors herself, writing herself into literary history and writing off traditions that have obstructed female creativity. This chapter will begin working towards an understanding of *Robinson* as a feminised quest narrative, in which the ultimate prize for the questing heroine is self-definition and self-authorship. Looking in depth at the authorial battles between January and Robinson and January and Tom Wells, this chapter investigates how mockery, banter, puns and wordplay all in different ways enable Spark's comic heroine to elude the limiting names, roles and fate allocated her.

In my fourth and final chapter, *Robinson* will be read as a female quest narrative but the focus of this quest will broaden from individual change to cultural and collective change. Via close readings of the novel's conclusion, *Robinson* will be understood as a text of possibility, multiplicity, polyphony and hope. The frequently

female-identified practice of narrative non-closure is here read, not just as a protest against an inherited and inscribed masculine form, but as a call for social revolution and change. Again, this reflects the belief that feminist humour ultimately seeks to effect cultural change in the real world. In rejecting the closure of conventional endings, female comic authors make a feminist practice of defying comic traditions and redefining this problematic genre in a way that better serves their sex. They create a space in which new myths, institutions, beliefs and norms become possible, particularly around sex, sexuality, gender and gender expression. In this new space, typically marginalised voices are admitted into the cultural conversation. In the end, Muriel Spark's *Robinson* emerges as a profoundly hopeful text – hopeful for womankind, mankind and humankind. For womankind, the most profound gift comedy yields is full membership in the club of humanity and, with it, the ability to intervene in their own society and culture. Unlike the patriarchal structures feminist comedy so roundly critiques, this club is not closed or fixed or exclusive but diverse, expansive and inclusively human.

## CHAPTER 1: A WOMAN ON THE ISLE OF MAN

January Marlow is one of three plane crash survivors who find themselves marooned for a three-month period on a dilapidated island called Robinson. The island has been named by and after its benevolent but controlling owner who assumes leadership of the microcosmic society that consists of his adopted son, Miguel, and the three survivors – the lecherous Tom Wells, the chivalrous Jimmie Waterford and the mutinous January. Tensions rise between January and the male inhabitants of the island, turning violent with the disappearance and apparent murder of their leader. Focusing on the basic premise and main characters of Spark's novel, this chapter will read *Robinson* as a colonial narrative in which the racial other has been replaced by a gendered other. I will draw on research from the field of Island Studies to explore how Spark sets up a self-contained, miniature world of the Other that acts as a feminist allegory for the experience of being a woman in a man's world. Employing the Humane Humour Rule used by many female humourists, Spark populates her masculinist world with caricatured male types and uses comic doubles to compound her critique of patriarchal culture. Following in the tradition of much female humour and feminist satire, Spark gives specificity to her male types by concentrating on their ridiculous, recycled speech acts. Her heroine, in contrast, is endowed with a rebellious, anarchic, transfiguring humour that enables her to resist repeated threats of violence, invasion and erasure attempted by this colonising patriarchal culture. A brief examination of the imperialist themes of *Robinson Crusoe* and *Swiss Family Robinson*, two of Spark's parodied texts, will help consolidate my

view of Spark's island culture as one that seeks to assimilate problem Others like January and Miguel. January will also be introduced as one in a long line of Sparkian heroines who not only write but rewrite literary and cultural myths. Feminist critiques of *Robinson* often read this character and Spark's novel as a reclamation of a powerful and positive female mythology. Expanding on this criticism, I will discuss how Spark embraces the material, the bodily and animalistic in order to invert cultural hierarchies of gender. With her use of mask and the grotesque, Spark creates in January a fluid female comic body that puts on and takes off genders with a vengeance.

### **AN ODD WOMAN OUT IN AN OTHER WORLD**

*Robinson* is framed as January's reflection on her island adventure after she returns to the world beyond the island. The novel includes sections of her original journal entries, purportedly written whilst on the island. Also interspersed throughout the narrative are memories of her previous life, including glimpses into her relationships with her sisters, Agnes and Julia, and with her grandmother. These analeptic interludes also give insight into January's acrimonious relationship with her sisters' spouses, Ian Brodie and Curly Lonsdale, as well as her late husband and their son, Brian. None inhabit the island, but all enter into her reflections once she returns home and completes her book. Critically considered an "odd man out" – or perhaps more fittingly, an odd woman out – amongst her other works, in many ways *Robinson* stands apart from Spark's usual formulation.<sup>60</sup> It is the first of only a few attempts at a long-form fictional first-person narrative. Providing all the elaborate descriptions expected of the island writing genre, it is far more expansive than her

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<sup>60</sup> Peter Kemp, *Muriel Spark* (London: Paul Elek, 1974), 11, 29.



usual sparse style.<sup>61</sup> It is one of only a few novels by Spark not to be rooted in a large, familiar metropolis like London, Edinburgh, Rome or New York. While the mind of Spark's protagonist may drift back to her previous life in England, and she herself returns to it in the final chapter, the sometimes magical, sometimes ominous landscape of the island in *Robinson* overwhelms any other sense of place. Several recognisable Sparkian tropes are deployed, however, in this deceptively simple narrative, including that of the female writer character and fractional Spark substitute around whom the narrative is focalised. Peter Kemp ticks off another three tropes, noting the "satiric presentation of a carefully limited society, witty depiction of its closely scrutinized inhabitants, [and] ironically accurate notation of the speech-inanities, social and private rituals, current in the circle under observation".<sup>62</sup> With the setting limited to the island, the time to three months and the cast to five characters, the tale has the tightly circumscribed quality typical of Spark.<sup>63</sup> Also common are the closed community of the island and its various hierarchies, rivalries, suspicions and manipulations acting as an allegory for wider social and cultural power structures.<sup>64</sup> For McQuillan, Spark's habit of situating her novels in insular communities enables her to "comment on the inadequacies of closure as a totalizing trope in literary and social narrative."<sup>65</sup> Metafictional, proleptic and analeptic interjections plus an incomplete sense of closure add to Spark's idiosyncratic subversion of literary conventions, destruction of the familiar and interrogation of the unstable, insidious nature of language and fiction. The presence of such themes and devices indicates that *Robinson* is much more than a simple survival story or island idyll.

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<sup>61</sup> Kemp, *Muriel Spark*, 30.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>63</sup> Velma Bourgeois Richmond, *Muriel Spark* (New York: F. Ungar Publishing Co., 1984), 38.

<sup>64</sup> Gregson, *Character and Satire*, 99; Patrick Parrinder, "Muriel Spark and Her Critics," *Critical Quarterly* 25, no. 2 (Summer 1983): 28, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8705.1983.tb01931.x>.

<sup>65</sup> McQuillan, "Introduction: 'I Don't Know Anything about Freud'," 18.

Yet critics have struggled to comprehend this witty but baffling book. For Carol Ohmann, it is an extreme case of Sparkian inscrutability that, due to the author's indirect, reticent style, eludes brief or casual explanation.<sup>66</sup> While some have attempted to demystify the novel by reading it as a distorted fictional biography through which the author processes a physical and/or mental illness, others read in *Robinson* a determination to discredit utopian illusions.<sup>67</sup> Some critics skip the novel altogether.<sup>68</sup> Many defer to Ohmann's psychoanalytic interpretation, which posits that the male characters each represent an aspect of January's fragmented consciousness that requires post-traumatic reintegration.<sup>69</sup> In Ohmann's reading of Spark's "landscape of the mind",<sup>70</sup> Robinson represents the superego, Jimmie the ego and Wells the id.<sup>71</sup> This reading is supported by the concussion, memory lapses and admitted unreliability of the novel's narrator as well as portrayals of the island and its inhabitants as possessing metaphysical or mythical dimensions.<sup>72</sup> This metaphysical aspect has further complicated interpretive efforts since the entire narrative could conceivably be a mere "trick of the mind" or "dead woman's dream".<sup>73</sup> As Spark's "least typical work," Judy Little notes that *Robinson* is "generally considered to be a lapse among her achievements."<sup>74</sup> For her, the novel lacks the excitement and contrast of her other novels as no "violently peculiar, abnormal world" intervenes in the "assumed normality" of the "home" world.<sup>75</sup> Indeed, in *Robinson*, this Sparkian formula in the making is flipped. This could, however, be viewed as a pertinent point of interest rather than one of weakness. In this chapter, I

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<sup>66</sup> Ohmann, "Muriel Spark's *Robinson*," 70.

<sup>67</sup> Parrinder, "Muriel Spark and Her Critics," 27, 29.

<sup>68</sup> Allan Massie, *Muriel Spark* (Edinburgh: Ramsay Head Press, 1979).

<sup>69</sup> Ohmann, "Muriel Spark's *Robinson*," 76.

<sup>70</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 7.

<sup>71</sup> Ohmann, "Muriel Spark's *Robinson*," 76.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 130–31, 174–75.

<sup>73</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 36, 174–75.

<sup>74</sup> Judy Little, *Comedy and the Woman Writer: Woolf, Spark, and Feminism* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 110.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

will therefore read the double, displaced realities of *Robinson* as a deliberately feminist comic strategy. A recognised staple of comedy, Spark uses, even overuses, the comic double to compound her critique of the patriarchal culture and masculine types that seek to colonise all those who present as Other.

This chapter understands the basic premise of *Robinson* as an allegory for the experience of being a woman in a man's world. The presence of a second reality in *Robinson*, and its similarity to the world of the island, ensures that readers recognise the direct and critical comparison Spark is drawing between the microcosmic patriarchal society of the island and the larger patriarchal society January reflects upon throughout and eventually returns to. As the novel progresses, it becomes increasingly clear that patriarchal acts of control, appropriation, dismissal and violence are far from limited to the island on which January is trapped or the men with whom she is marooned. Robinson's island is a world in itself – a world in which a woman is always unsafe, never at home and constantly configured as outsider or Other. Islands are bound spaces, limited and knowable yet intriguingly independent. Frequently, they are depicted as finite realms that are easy to own, control, design or manipulate.<sup>76</sup> The enduring popularity of texts like *Robinson Crusoe* and *Swiss Family Robinson* has contributed to the perception of islands, in both literary culture and the popular imaginary, as sites of fantasy, mythology and utopian communality.<sup>77</sup> Their circular forms make them apt symbols of perfection and unity while also offering the tantalising opportunity to “play God,” to “make islands in our own image”, to imprint humanity onto a blank, apparently barren landscape.<sup>78</sup> As Godfrey Baldacchino explains, “[a]n Island *is* a world; yet an Island *engages* the

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<sup>76</sup> Godfrey Baldacchino, “Editorial: Islands - Objects of Representation,” *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography* 87, no. 4 (2005): 247, [www.jstor.org/stable/3554385](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3554385).

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 247–48.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

world” (emphasis original).<sup>79</sup> Both separate and dependent,<sup>80</sup> islands are defined by their differential relationship to the wider world, just as women are often, individually and collectively, defined by their differential relationship with men. Spark’s island, like many literary islands, is ultimately an expression of the differences that are encountered by any entity “when it faces absolute otherness at the limits of representation”.<sup>81</sup> Thus, in *Robinson*, the “home” world *is* the world of the Other. Intervening intermittently in this world are memories of the real world, but the real world imbued with a distant, nebulous, otherworldly quality. The bizarre, alternative world with which Spark usually supplies us has been centralised, while the real world, usually serving to ground us in reality, is this time marginalised, othered. In chapter 4, I will look further at the feminist practice of robbing readers of a stable sense of home. In this chapter, it is more important that the dual reality and island setting of *Robinson* be understood as literary choices that activate boundaries and divisions between worlds, people and genders.

Dropped into this world of the Other, January encounters three “examples of masculine excess”.<sup>82</sup> Bolstering her critique of patriarchal society, Spark fills her microcosmic rendering with caricatured male types. Robinson’s fascination with facts “places him in a long line of narrow masculine rationalists who are dotted throughout Spark’s corpus”.<sup>83</sup> He is another of Spark’s “dangerously attractive mythomaniacs” who believe their “myth-fictions” will determine the reality and destiny of all those under their sway.<sup>84</sup> Wells “is a sensualist, hungry for money, for leisure, for good

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<sup>79</sup> Baldacchino, “Editorial: Islands,” 248.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 248–49.

<sup>81</sup> Stewart Williams, “Virtually Impossible: Deleuze and Derrida on the Political Problem of Islands (and Island Studies),” *Island Studies Journal* 7, no. 2 (2012): 223, ProQuest.

<sup>82</sup> Bryan Cheyette, *Muriel Spark* (Tavistock, Devon, U.K.: Northcote House in association with the British Council, 2000), 34.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>84</sup> Bryan Cheyette, “Writing Against Conversion: Muriel Spark the Gentile Jewess,” in McQuillan, *Theorizing Muriel Spark*, 96.

food, for women”.<sup>85</sup> Jimmie “seems to be borrowed straight from a Shakespearean play, leaving intact the peculiar, colourfully outdated language and the odd mixture of chivalry and knavery”.<sup>86</sup> With Ian Brodie and Curly Lonsdale, Spark introduces two comic doubles that exist in the life January left behind on the isle of Britain. Spark’s central figures, Cheyette notes, “are often doubled and redoubled.”<sup>87</sup> A long-established trope of distortion, the comic double complicates notions of unity and identity and often results in laughter at paradoxical situations, lexical oppositions and temporal ruptures.<sup>88</sup> In using a modern form of this ancient formula, Spark indicates that sovereign identity will prove pivotal to her heroine’s narrative and begins her disruption of the uniform structures of logic, language and linearity. Spark uses this comic tool of exaggeration to parallel January’s controlling relationship with her deceased husband with that of her domineering host.<sup>89</sup> Robinson more often reminds her, however, of her brother-in-law, Ian Brodie.<sup>90</sup> In the first man, she sees “a fetish of self-control” while the second causes her to feel “obscurely endangered”.<sup>91</sup> Both staunch anti-Marian Catholics, Brodie has an “offensive way of looking at a woman” while Robinson she sees as indifferent to “the feminine element in women”.<sup>92</sup> His “armed neutrality” is likely, she adds, to turn “positively hostile to the idea of women in general”.<sup>93</sup> For Kemp, Brodie is the “repulsive extreme, almost a caricature, of Robinson’s type of personality,” their common flaws heightened into a grotesque.<sup>94</sup> Both men fixate on January’s religious beliefs and love life as a way of controlling her identity and autonomy. A similar parallel is drawn between Tom Wells and Curly

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<sup>85</sup> Ohmann, “Muriel Spark’s *Robinson*,” 73.

<sup>86</sup> Księżopolska, “The Missing Body,” 11.

<sup>87</sup> Cheyette, “Writing Against Conversion,” 97.

<sup>88</sup> Benjamín García-Hernández, “Paradoxes in the Argumentation of the Comic Double and Classemic Contradiction,” *Argumentation* 17, no. 1 (2003): 100, 101, 103, 108, ProQuest.

<sup>89</sup> Ohmann, “Muriel Spark’s *Robinson*,” 72–73.

<sup>90</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 23, 78–80, 88–92, 164–65.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 73, 79.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 29, 91.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>94</sup> Kemp, *Muriel Spark*, 32.

Lonsdale, boyfriend to January's younger sister, Julia.<sup>95</sup> Originally posing only a minor threat to her equanimity, January's instinct nevertheless tells her to steer clear of Wells, who later attempts her physical and artistic destruction. As with many of Spark's female protagonists, though the threat to January's life is real, ultimately she is "never damaged, only amused".<sup>96</sup>

Employing universal character types in an effort to reform human vice has a long history in various satiric forms. By its very nature, satire deals in generalisations, in the recognition and acceptance of types.<sup>97</sup> Female satirists, however, have employed this form with a greater sense of specificity, perhaps because they have felt the sting of such generalisations. Gloria Kaufman writes that, "[s]ince it arises from a subculture that has no patience with stereotyping, especially in relation to sex roles, we should not be surprised at the tendency of feminist humor to avoid stereotypic characters."<sup>98</sup> Feminist comedy and humour instead focuses its attack on actions and behaviours, though usually "the character who commits the behavior is not a stereotyped character."<sup>99</sup> Writing on this female tendency in greater detail, Emily Toth coins the term: "The Humane Humour Rule".<sup>100</sup> According to Toth, most female humour employs this rule by not attacking anything that an individual cannot themselves change, including disability, race, sex or physical appearance.<sup>101</sup> Rather, female humourists prefer to target types, choices, hypocrisies, affectations and the unquestioning adherence to social expectations.<sup>102</sup> In doing so, female humour avoids reversing the sins committed by so much traditional masculine

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<sup>95</sup> Kemp, *Muriel Spark*, 53, 97, 117, 137–38.

<sup>96</sup> Martin Stannard, *Muriel Spark: The Biography* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2009), 483.

<sup>97</sup> Zoja Pavlovskis-Petit, "Irony & Satire," in *Companion to Satire*, ed. Ruben Quintero (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 517.

<sup>98</sup> Gloria J. Kaufman, introduction to *Pulling Our Own Strings: Feminist Humor & Satire*, eds. Gloria J. Kaufman & Mary Kay Blakely (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 14.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> Emily Toth, "Female Wits," *The Massachusetts Review* 22, no. 4 (Winter 1981): 783, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25089227>.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

humour that essentialised and victimised an entire gender. Women writers instead pitch these male figures as “instances of particular *types* rather than representatives of an entire gender” (emphasis original).<sup>103</sup> Furthermore, Nancy Walker notes, in depicting men as “proud, boastful, messy, boisterous, and untrustworthy – all characteristics of a ruling majority that takes its role very seriously”, these types become “directly related to women’s subordinate position in society” and part of an effort “to undermine man’s position of dominance”.<sup>104</sup>

In keeping with this female tradition, Spark’s satirisation of masculine types concentrates on speech. Robinson, Wells and Jimmie are each given a type of speech to work with and various catchphrases that become increasingly ridiculous upon repetition. Robinson has “Stick to facts”, *Nunquam minus solus quam cum solus* (Never less alone than when alone) and “It was only to be expected”.<sup>105</sup> Wells spouts “We’re lucky to be alive” and displays an endless propensity to refer to January by patronising nicknames, endearments or even the occasional pejorative.<sup>106</sup> This propensity in Wells reflects Barreca’s remark that simply by “repeating the sometimes mild, sometimes grave, atrocities directed towards women in everyday life, the woman writer assumes the tasks of the satirist”.<sup>107</sup> Possibly the most comical and repetitive of these types is Jimmie Waterford, who constantly constructs inaccurate idioms, is forever losing his nerve and habitually combines ‘maybe’ and ‘perhaps’ to form “mayhaps”.<sup>108</sup> Jimmie’s most common verbal tick is the placidly observational: “Is true,” “Is serious” or “Is humorous”, which in the novel’s climax

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<sup>103</sup> Walker, *A Very Serious Thing*, 137.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>105</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 17, 18, 21, 23, 25, 75, 133, 165–67.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 47, 51, 55, 66, 86, 87, 96–97, 118, 138–40, 155.

<sup>107</sup> Barreca, “‘Untamed and Unabashed’,” 21.

<sup>108</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 22, 26, 40, 41, 56, 57, 104, 114, 116, 126, 127, 149, 158, 164.

collapses into a petrified: “Is not humorous”.<sup>109</sup> His imperfect English undoubtedly provides some of the easiest laughs in the novel, derived as it is

first from a Swiss uncle, using Shakespeare and some seventeenth-century poets as textbooks, and Fowler’s *Modern English Usage* as a guide, and secondly from contact with Allied forces during the war.<sup>110</sup>

The resultant blend of exaggerated courtesy, aggressive machismo and bizarre syntax does more than deliver comedy. It does more even than contribute to Spark’s interrogation of the English language – its arbitrary conventions, heterogeneous history and gendered nature included. These limited, recycled speech acts contrast starkly with January’s poetic flights and linguistic skill and are part of Spark’s “calculatedly reductive” use of caricature.<sup>111</sup> Driven by “suspicion, rebellious anger and satirical contempt,” Gregson writes that the postmodern inclination towards caricature forms part of

its deconstruction of the traditional monolith of Western and masculine cultural values, and its replacement by a cultural polyphony in which self-consciously gendered and racial perspectives have claimed their right to assert themselves. That polyphony has markedly increased awareness of how one cultural group can stamp a reductiveness on others [...] Caricature can express that awareness because its resources define above all the dehumanizing of the demonized or reified other.<sup>112</sup>

In *Robinson*, Spark is working consciously with issues of gender, with the culturally weighted categories of masculine and feminine, rather than with issues of race and ethnicity. Nevertheless, in exploring language so meticulously, she depicts “the attempt of one person or group to colonize other persons and groups and to make them speak their language”.<sup>113</sup> This chapter and the next will detail how January, as the lone woman on Spark’s miniature isle of man, uses humour to resist repeated

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<sup>109</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 30, 52, 53, 59, 62, 70, 103 108, 113, 149.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>111</sup> Gregson, *Character and Satire*, 100.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 4–5.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 4.



masculine attempts to colonise her mind, body and art. In my final chapter, I will argue that Spark's comedy ultimately advocates the kind of cultural polyphony that caricature, along with other comic forms, can inspire.

## GENDERING COLONIAL NARRATIVES AND RESISTING MASCULINE TAKEOVERS

In 1949, Spark wrote to a friend that most men “do not like to see women as an island and attempt to land and set their flag on it”.<sup>114</sup> Biographer Martin Stannard used the title of her 1976 novel, *The Takeover*, to state that most of her fiction “deals with resistance to attempted ‘takeovers’”.<sup>115</sup> Moreover, Stannard writes, while the female artist of Spark's imagination may be possessed by a vision, she must never be possessed by another.<sup>116</sup> In *Robinson*, Spark's concussed, disoriented heroine initially accedes to Robinson's patriarchal order, following his instructions “with meticulous care, as one dazed and unable to exercise curiosity”.<sup>117</sup> She muses that at first she simply “accepted the situation [...] that Robinson was in charge, and that I was to look after Tom Wells at certain fixed times”.<sup>118</sup> But, within a week, she recovers her bearings and begins to “act independently of Robinson”, firstly by writing her journal and secondly by refusing to nurse Wells.<sup>119</sup> Her refusal is prompted by the following exchange:

He put out his hand and touched me.  
 ‘You’re a nice piece of homework,’ he said.  
 I think I could have saved the soup. Really, I do not know, maybe I deliberately let go of the tray. The soup tipped over him, down the front of his shirt and over the sheets, like blood in a Technicolour film.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Stannard, *Muriel Spark: The Biography*, 111.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 354.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

<sup>117</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 14.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 21–22.

Deliberate or not, the comedy of this moment will not be lost on any woman who has found herself on the receiving end of an unwelcome gaze and/or touch. Wells' physical act of claiming and verbal innuendo incite Spark's comic heroine to abandon her role as dutiful nursemaid, indeed, to abandon all feminine propriety in favour of tipping soup over her impertinent patient. Breaking with the venerated roles and rules of demure femininity is undoubtedly the comic heroine's province and forte. If Freud is correct and comedy allows for the expression of repressed impulses,<sup>121</sup> then feminist literary comedy allows women readers the vicarious thrill of reacting as they would if they, like their brave literary counterparts, felt unconstrained by the social expectations of their sex.

The laughter, however, is tempered by seriousness, even danger. The evocation of blood is made more ominous in the following passage when January tells Robinson that she refuses to be left alone with Wells.<sup>122</sup> She exhorts Robinson to speak with him: "Warn him. Threaten." Robinson replies, "I shall say you wear a knife in your stocking."<sup>123</sup> This exchange prefigures the underground climax in which Wells threatens January with a knife as "[g]uns make too much noise".<sup>124</sup> Stripped of Robinson's protection and left alone with Wells as feared, January must defeat him alone, using her female wits rather than the masculine brawn she lacks. The narrative trajectory of this relationship links small acts of claiming and men of seemingly negligible threat with unforeseen danger. John Glavin writes that the primal brutality of men and the intellectual constriction of heterosexual relationships pose a constant threat to Spark's heroines, particularly in her early works.<sup>125</sup> He links this underlying yet pervasive threat with the trauma of her violent, unhappy

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<sup>121</sup> Caliskan, "Is There Such a Thing as Women's Humor?," 50.

<sup>122</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 22.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>125</sup> John Glavin, "Muriel Spark: Beginning Again," in *British Women Writing Fiction*, ed. Abby H. P. Werlock (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2000), 302–3.

marriage.<sup>126</sup> The threat posed by men in *Robinson* may well reflect the trauma of one woman, but it may equally pass judgement on patriarchal cultures that allow small deeds to escalate into much graver crimes. Whether inspired by her own life experience or not, all Spark's works contain "events of great emotional violence",<sup>127</sup> if not the constant threat of physical violence. Rather than understanding these acts via the author's biography, I understand them as acts of control and claiming perpetrated by a masculine force intent on invasion, erasure and colonisation.

As noted in my introduction, Spark's novel is partially a parodic revisioning of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. In *Robinson*, however, the racial other of the colonial narrative has been recast as the gender other. Not simply the tale of one man's mythic conversion experience, Susan Smit-Marais writes that in *Robinson Crusoe*

Crusoe's conversion of an unknown, marginal and ambiguous geographical locale into a prototypical British colony establishes a monologic world order on the island that defines identity as fixed and the island space as contained. In the Bakhtinian sense, a monologic world is closed, static, and limiting in the way in which it denies the Other.<sup>128</sup>

Crusoe's cultivated, controlled paradise, testifying boldly to the forces of Enlightenment rectitude and Western accomplishment, becomes threatened by the arrival of an Other, a native islander he saves from wild cannibals.<sup>129</sup> Like Spark's heroine, Man Friday is associated with the natural world, with the untamed wilderness of the island.<sup>130</sup> January is named after the month of her birth, a name that reflects her own life story.<sup>131</sup> Friday is named after the day Crusoe rescued him,

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<sup>126</sup> Glavin, "Muriel Spark: Beginning Again," 302–3.

<sup>127</sup> Regina Barreca, "The Ancestral Laughter of the Streets: Humor in Muriel Spark's Earlier Works," in Barreca, *New Perspectives on Women and Comedy*, 233.

<sup>128</sup> Susan Smit-Marais, "Converted Spaces, Contained Places: *Robinson Crusoe*'s Monologic World," *Journal of Literary Studies* 27, no. 1 (2011): 103, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02564718.2011.557229>.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 103, 109.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>131</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 12.

reflecting his master's story and satisfying his compulsion to imaginatively appropriate space, experience and people through language.<sup>132</sup> Also rescued by her reclusive host, January writes in her journal: "I feel that we are all unwelcome on the island [...] Robinson seems rather irritated by all of us".<sup>133</sup> As a woman, January is singled out as being especially problematic. Following an exchange with Robinson and Jimmie, she "darkly" discerns that "they had been discussing me considerably as a female problem".<sup>134</sup> Evoking without belabouring historical debates regarding The Woman Question, Spark deftly illustrates how the process of othering is achieved through language and how it looks from the perspective of the othered party. January's wry response is to steal and smoke more than her ration of cigarettes, a course she views as "preferable to nurturing a grudge".<sup>135</sup> With such small acts of rebellion, Spark's Woman January fulfils the "potential for alterity and newness" that Defoe's Man Friday offers but is disallowed from delivering within the narrative enclosing him. Marginalised and imaginatively colonised,<sup>136</sup> Friday is seen by Crusoe as another blank canvas, much like the uncivilized island landscape, on which to inscribe his own, more superior identity.<sup>137</sup> In Defoe's world, any foreign space or individual must submit to the monologic order of that which is white, male, Christian and English.<sup>138</sup> This illustrates Steven Connor's point that

the myth of the colonised land as a tabula rasa, an empty field of possibility, where men may start anew [...] is sustained by the erasure of the history that is always already in place in the colonised land. This is often an erasure of the fact of violence; though the erasure is always an act of violence in itself.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Smit-Marais, "Converted Spaces, Contained Places," 109.

<sup>133</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 40.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>136</sup> Smit-Marais, "Converted Spaces, Contained Places," 109.

<sup>137</sup> David Marshall, "Autobiographical Acts in *Robinson Crusoe*," *ELH* 71, no. 4 (Winter 2004): 915, [www.jstor.org/stable/30029950](http://www.jstor.org/stable/30029950).

<sup>138</sup> Smit-Marais, "Converted Spaces, Contained Places," 105.

<sup>139</sup> Steven Connor, "Origins and Reversions," in *The English Novel in History, 1950 to the Present* (New York, London: Routledge, 1996), 189, ProQuest Ebook Central.

In Spark's fiction, such violence is perpetrated against people rather than lands or cultures. People become sovereign territories capable of being colonised and imperious authority figures often endeavour to erase a pre-existing or emergent identity, typically of a resistant female protagonist.

Continuing her pattern of doubling, Spark provides a second Man Friday figure in Miguel, whose Spanish/Portuguese/unknown heritage casts him as the racial Other to all the other inhabitants of the island. Though it is beyond the scope of this project to investigate racialised narratives in detail, it is worth noting Eleanor Byrne's point that in Spark's fiction "constructions of race and gender are intimately linked and operate in complex relationships with one another."<sup>140</sup> Like the Spanish architecture on Robinson, Miguel refers back to the island's previous incarnation as 'Ferreira', before Robinson purchased and renamed the property, all but erasing its former identity.<sup>141</sup> As the only child on the island, Miguel is another identity, like January, in the process of transition and transformation. In later chapters, we will return to the idea that Miguel's journey echoes January's. The presence of a child in Spark's novel also activates a critical reading of another of Spark's parodied texts. Just as Defoe's novel is considered the first English novel, Johann David Wyss' *Swiss Family Robinson* is considered the first children's novel ever produced.<sup>142</sup> It contains similar themes of empire-building, despite the fact that the obligatory 'noble savage' figure and marauding native populations are absent.<sup>143</sup> John Seelye nonetheless labels the family "prototypical colonists" in that they "replicate their old way of life in new, even exotic, surroundings," "give order to their island by giving place names to prominent features of the landscape," and actively seek to master or

<sup>140</sup> Eleanor Byrne, "Muriel Spark Shot in Africa," in McQuillan, *Theorizing Muriel Spark*, 124.

<sup>141</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 17, 19.

<sup>142</sup> John Seelye, "Introduction: *The Swiss Family Robinson*," in *Work and Play in Children's Literature* (The International Conference of the Children's Literature Association, San Diego, USA: *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 1990 Proceedings), 1, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/chq.1990.0003>.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

exterminate the animal population of their assumed home.<sup>144</sup> Indeed, women and racial minorities have throughout history been so frequently associated with animals that how animals are treated by this band of prototypical colonists may nevertheless serve to allegorically reflect the treatment of human Others under similar masculinist regimes.

Like Defoe's novel, there is a "preponderance of the male element in Wyss' novel."<sup>145</sup> Family life on the *Swiss Family Robinson* island is "distinctly patriarchal," with the father delivering edifying lectures at every opportunity and "the mother providing at best a mollifying function".<sup>146</sup> Seelye writes that the pastor/father "combines the roles of fond parent and thoughtful tutor" posited by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in *Émile* as the ideal learning environment.<sup>147</sup> In Rousseau's pedagogically themed work, *Émile* is to have "a single companion mentor (himself), and [...] only one book for his diversion, *Robinson Crusoe*."<sup>148</sup> Ridiculing such notions of singular authority, Spark has Robinson invite his guests into his sitting-room "as one's headmistress would have one in to tea".<sup>149</sup> January observes that he seems determined to maintain control of himself, his guests and his island.<sup>150</sup> To this end, he prescribes Rossini's *La Cenerentola* as a civilised evening's entertainment, sighing at the mention of cabaret and jazz music.<sup>151</sup> Deciding to annoy him, January allies herself briefly with Wells to discuss unrefined pop music, thinking spitefully to herself: "Serve you right [...] for your inflexible pose. Give you something [...] to exercise detachment upon."<sup>152</sup> Miguel observes this exchange, "not following the actual

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<sup>144</sup> Seelye, "Introduction: *The Swiss Family Robinson*," 8–9.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 6–7, 9–10.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>149</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 46.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 47–48.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

conversation,” January notes, “but feeling out for himself how things stood between us all.”<sup>153</sup> This is one of many instances in which Spark’s heroine challenges Robinson on Miguel’s behalf or in his presence, protesting his unadulterated influence over the boy. She likewise worries when she sees Miguel becoming besotted by the rakish Wells.<sup>154</sup> Throughout the novel, she seeks to win the boy’s trust and introduce him to whatever intrigues him, her rosary included.<sup>155</sup> In doing so, she defies the monological worldview adopted by men like Robinson, Defoe’s Crusoe, Wyss’ Pastor Robinson and Rousseau who do not question their right to control conversations, civilisations, individual identities and the democratic dissemination of knowledge. Unlike Émile with his single text and the Robinson children with their single educational/spiritual advisor, Miguel eventually escapes the single, undisputed influence of Robinson, returning to the world to seek an education derived, it is hoped, from a variety of sources, people and experiences.

Central to *Robinson* is the battle of wills between the island’s owner-operator and Spark’s marooned anti-heroine. No corresponding female element exists on Defoe’s island. But a female presence does enter the masculine utopia of *Swiss Family Robinson* in its final chapters. A rescued castaway girl offers to at least one grown son the possibilities of marriage, division from family and repatriation to the old world.<sup>156</sup> Seelye, for one, seems to view the contributions of this female character and the Robinson family’s mother with disdain, though his perception may be coloured by the “corporate” authorship of this famous text.<sup>157</sup> For, while Johann David Wyss’ name appears on the cover of the book, a significant portion of this beloved text was written by a woman. Baroness Isabelle de Montolieu was the original

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<sup>153</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 48.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 34, 98, 109, 141, 145, 146–47, 158, 174.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 33–35, 37–38, 56, 58–60, 73, 89–90, 95, 128–29, 135, 166.

<sup>156</sup> Seelye, “Introduction: *The Swiss Family Robinson*,” 11.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 9–11.

French translator of the novel but many of her extensions on the narrative, including the arrival of Emily/Jenny the castaway, have been subsumed into the well-known version of the narrative.<sup>158</sup> Spark's female intruder/castaway is, like de Montolieu, not only a writer but a re-writer. In the opening chapters of *Robinson*, January identifies herself to her fellow islanders as a journalist. To her reader, she adds: "I thought this was understating the case, but it provided an approximate category to poet, critic, and general articulator of ideas."<sup>159</sup> Initially then, January's authorial ability is stunted, buried, unarticulated. When her plane crashes, she is on her way to complete a trio of books on islands, part of "a series which included books about threes of everything. Three rivers, three lakes, and threes of mountains, courtesans, battles, poets, old country houses."<sup>160</sup> She never completes this book. "Someone else, now, has written the book on Three Islands," she reports, "I believe someone has added to the series Three Men in My Life."<sup>161</sup> This last title could be a fitting alternative for the novel January eventually produces (and thus one of Spark's sly inside jokes). For during her journey, as subsequent chapters will explore, this character evolves from a journalist into novelist, from a re-writer of world history into the definitive writer of her own.

Sparkian protagonists are often writers and often female. Some critics argue that women still work from an underprivileged position as writers due to a persistent perception of writing as a masculine occupation.<sup>162</sup> According to Sevda Caliskan, writing and humour are both gender-marked, with comedy and humour "perhaps more gender-specific than anything else because of their social foundations."<sup>163</sup> It becomes difficult then not to see in January a strong feminist statement, as in all the

<sup>158</sup> Seelye, "Introduction: *The Swiss Family Robinson*," 4, 9–12.

<sup>159</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 23.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>162</sup> Caliskan, "Is There Such a Thing as Women's Humor?," 53.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*



funny female writers with which Spark populates her novels. Entertainingly flawed, Spark's heroines all possess "the power of language [...] of the satiric transfiguring voice".<sup>164</sup> Spark's fictional authorial figure is, Barreca believes, an anarchist, "a subversive figure, armed with humour against the dominant ideology".<sup>165</sup> For McQuillan, casting her protagonists as writers is another way that Spark turns "writing and genre inside out to exhibit the structures, conventions, and ideologies at stake within texts".<sup>166</sup> Playing with literary genres and conventions is, for Spark, a way to test, expose and critique the larger ideologies embedded within them, as chapters 2 and 4 of this thesis will explore. In chapter 3, I will return to the idea of the woman writer rewriting cultural and literary myths and reclaiming female narratives. Indeed, throughout this thesis, I wish to illustrate Rachel Blau Plessis' point that

[t]o face myth as a woman writer is, putting things at their most extreme, to stand at the impact point of a strong system of interpretation masked as representation, and to rehearse one's own colonization or 'iconization' through the materials one's culture considers powerful and primary.<sup>167</sup>

With *Robinson*, Spark not only engages with several major literary precedents, as well as "the history of beliefs and attitudes to which those originals have belonged and which they have helped to shape".<sup>168</sup> She, like her heroine, re-configures the material her culture has deemed most powerful and primary.

Studying other rewrites of *Robinson Crusoe*, Steven Connor aims to uncover what happens when "the processes of revision, reversal and reversion" are applied

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<sup>164</sup> Randisi, "Muriel Spark and Satire," 140–41.

<sup>165</sup> Barreca, "The Ancestral Laughter of the Streets," 232.

<sup>166</sup> Martin McQuillan, "In Bed with Muriel Spark: Mourning, Metonymy and Autobiography," in McQuillan, *Theorizing Muriel Spark*, 81.

<sup>167</sup> Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 106.

<sup>168</sup> Connor, "Origins and Reversions," 167.

to “the original cultural myth of origin”.<sup>169</sup> For whenever “such texts are subject to rewriting, the question of origin is interestingly redoubled.”<sup>170</sup> Often, he adds,

the substitution or insertion of a female narrative draws attention to the remarkable absence of the female in the originals, revealing the ways in which myths of extremity and origin, literary and otherwise, have often been bound up with a male myth of parthenogenetic self-authoring.<sup>171</sup>

Though Spark’s text is not one of the revisions Connor studies, *Robinson* might be said to perform a similar work, replacing the story of male self-origination with female self-possession.<sup>172</sup> Such revisions, Connor asserts, frequently reveal a link between violence against cultural memory and violence against the female.<sup>173</sup> In *Robinson*, a submerged female terrain exists beneath the surface of this overtly masculine land. The caves in which January will later overpower Wells are described in terms reminiscent of female anatomy – a “fluted grotto” leads to a “narrow mouth” that opens into “the hot centre of the earth.”<sup>174</sup> But shelves and steps have been “hacked” into the rock walls of these caves, allowing their hidden recesses to be more easily “penetrated”.<sup>175</sup> Resembling a “boulder-strewn” “battle-field”,<sup>176</sup> these secret female spaces have been habitually and crudely invaded, violently opened to successive acts of male colonisation. In this case, violence against the female landscape actually refers to the erasure of female culture, memory and myth. This theme has been the focus of the majority of feminist scholarship on *Robinson*. On the rare occasion that this novel is examined, it is usually understood as a reclamation of female myth and culture in which January is associated with magic, myth and materiality. Developing on this viewpoint, I propose that Spark uses mask and the

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<sup>169</sup> Connor, “Origins and Reversions,” 169.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>174</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 111.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 115

grotesque to create in her heroine a comic embodiment that breaks with conventions of femininity and disrupts any fixed notion of gender.

## OPPOSITIONAL FEMININE MYTHOLOGY AND THE FEMALE COMIC BODY

Feminine mythology has an immediate presence in *Robinson*. As early as the second page, January remembers feeling a “sweet and dreadful urge towards the moon”, a desire to throw her arms wide in worship.<sup>177</sup> The moon, traditionally associated with feminine goddesses and muses, prompts her to remember her gypsy grandmother’s ritual of bowing and chanting to the new moon.<sup>178</sup> Intoxicated by the blue gums and bougainvillea, she recalls the superstition that “the pagan mind runs strong in women” and describes her time on the island as being “touched with a pre-ancestral quality”, “an enchantment, a primitive blood-force”.<sup>179</sup> Robinson’s pomegranate orchard compounds this feminine imagery since pomegranates are associated with Sponsa, the virgin bride, and Sophia, the goddess of feminine wisdom.<sup>180</sup> As “an alien creature physiologically associated with blood and shifting moods”, January finds that her spiritual isolation on Robinson is alleviated by communion with the female features of the island.<sup>181</sup> Indeed, she returns to this moment of moon-communion later, suggesting that it is a defining moment in her journey of self-discovery.<sup>182</sup> January’s female mythology, backed by the presence of a powerful female lineage, stands in direct and challenging contrast to the pure, private doctrine espoused by Robinson, who clings to a male deity and denounces Marian imagery celebrating the Mother of God.<sup>183</sup> January notes that Robinson’s

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<sup>177</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 8.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 8–9.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>180</sup> Little, *Comedy and the Woman Writer*, 114.

<sup>181</sup> Bold, *Muriel Spark*, 43–44.

<sup>182</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 49.

<sup>183</sup> Little, *Comedy and the Woman Writer*, 115.

religious “obsession” is of such a size that he left the church to form a system of his own “bound by a simple chain of identities: Mariology was identified with Earth mythology, both were identified with superstition, and superstition with evil.”<sup>184</sup> She dismisses his personalised faith as a “[s]terile notion”, lamenting that their host is not just staunchly dictatorial but “constitutionally afraid of any material manifestation of Grace”.<sup>185</sup> Miles Mary Robinson’s middle name is therefore ironic, implying, according to Cheyette, that “instead of embracing his femininity,” “his loathing of the Virgin Mary is, above all else, a denial of that aspect of his character”.<sup>186</sup> In venerating masculine spirit and condemning feminine matter, frequently equated in religious doctrines with evil,<sup>187</sup> Robinson denies the feminine any place in his constitution, faith or micro-world. Spark, however, believed grace existed in the material as well as spiritual, promoting balance between matter and spirit,<sup>188</sup> and thus, we may surmise, between the masculine and the feminine categories with which they are traditionally associated.

Few critics have attempted a comprehensive reading of *Robinson*, with fewer still providing a detailed feminist reading. Velma Richmond notes briefly that there is “much in the novel to support a reading of distinctions between male and female minds, stereotypically viewed as rational and intuitive”.<sup>189</sup> Kemp likewise perceives “some attempt to sketch out a distinction between male and female attitudes to life: that of the male is presented as predominantly rational concerned with what can be proved or logically argued, whereas the female [...] owes more to instinct”.<sup>190</sup> Concentrating on January’s magical, pagan leanings Cheyette writes that *Robinson*

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<sup>184</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 80.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, 80, 98–99.

<sup>186</sup> Cheyette, *Muriel Spark*, 31.

<sup>187</sup> Kemp, *Muriel Spark*, 35.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>189</sup> Richmond, *Muriel Spark*, 40.

<sup>190</sup> Kemp, *Muriel Spark*, 35.

is one of many novels in which Spark illustrates at length “a distinctly feminine spirituality [that] enables her heroines to challenge patriarchal authority of all kinds”.<sup>191</sup> Barreca agrees that *Robinson* is “Spark’s most explicit exploration of women’s link with mythology and sorcery” and an affirmation of the value of the illogical, irrational and disruptive nature of the feminine.<sup>192</sup> For Little, it emphasises the importance of “finding and trusting one’s personal response to a large public ideology and the people who embody it”.<sup>193</sup> She writes that the novel not only “caricatures the male-imaged aspects of Catholicism – the arrogant masculine authority that withdraws from the pollution of the flesh and of women” but offers “one of the few paradigms in modern literature of a positive female myth”.<sup>194</sup> Spark’s positive female mythology certainly seems to comfort her heroine, but more important to this thesis is how it breaks with literary cultures – modern, pre-modern and ancient – which promulgated myths that have imprisoned, impeded, distorted or maligned womankind. Feminist critics have tended to focus on how *Robinson* reclaims female mythology for woman. But women’s relationship with myth has never been straightforward. As this thesis will continue to explore in chapter 2, negative myths of woman are as damned by Spark’s comedy as positive ones are embraced.

In *Robinson*, Spark does not reject the often demeaning association of woman with the material, the earthed and the bodily. On the contrary, she embraces it for comic effect. Chapter 9 opens with January spending three full pages “pulling faces” in an effort to “discover what it felt like to be Jimmie and Tom Wells

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<sup>191</sup> Cheyette, *Muriel Spark*, 18.

<sup>192</sup> Barreca, “Ancestral Laughter of the Streets,” 228.

<sup>193</sup> Little, *Comedy and the Woman Writer*, 110.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, 110–11.

respectively”.<sup>195</sup> In a rare, though by no means solitary, instance of physical comedy in Spark’s work, January explains that these contortions are her way of glimpsing another person’s state of mind and heart.<sup>196</sup> Adopting Jimmie’s and Wells’ physicality, she mimics their catchphrases in an effort to understand their potential motives for murdering Robinson.<sup>197</sup> This is a survival tactic but an absurd one, made more so by the baffled observation of Wells.<sup>198</sup> January later admits that the insights gleaned from her face-pulling habit are “distorted”.<sup>199</sup> “I am as near the mark as myth is to history,” she declares, “the apocrypha to the canon”.<sup>200</sup> But, much like the novel she inhabits, this ritual, dubbed by her a “pantomime”,<sup>201</sup> is an exploratory indulgence in the distorted, the disobedient and the unofficial. With a voracious Bakhtinian relish, she describes how she habitually chews over various faces in privacy “as a wild beast prefers to devour its prey in concealment”.<sup>202</sup> Eschewing science, she relies on intuition, “making a meal” of appearances and drawing instinctive judgments on the characters they represent.<sup>203</sup> As this passage suggests, Spark is bold in allying her heroine with the natural, the instinctive and animalistic. The only other females on the island are Bluebell the Cat and Bella the Goat (comic doubles, perhaps, for her sisters), and at one point January wonders if Robinson thinks of her in a similar way.<sup>204</sup> She notices the shapes of the heads of Robinson, Ian Brodie and Tom Wells.<sup>205</sup> And she is peeved by Robinson cultivating the island’s Headlands while leaving the rest of the body to rot and ruin.<sup>206</sup> It is this lower stratum of the body, in

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<sup>195</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 116–18.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, 116, 117.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, 23, 80–81.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

Bakhtinian theory, that is associated with the earthed, physical feminine while the masculine inhabits the loftier sphere of spirit and rationality.<sup>207</sup> Carnival, in Bakhtin's belief, inverts these categories, playing with notions of top and bottom, subject and object, human and animal, master and slave.<sup>208</sup> By allowing her heroine to embrace grotesque, animalistic physicality, Spark creates a one-woman carnival that inverts the customary power dynamic between the earthy feminine and rational masculine. She complicates both by implying that an instinctive but valid form of intelligence resides in the body. With these passages of determined grotesquery, top becomes bottom, evil becomes noble and norm becomes caricature as masculinity is pulled from reverence into ridicule.

This grotesque ritual of 'putting on' masculinity is best juxtaposed with an incident in which January fantasises about the feminine mask she left behind. After a crying fit, brought on by encountering the plane wreck in which hundreds died and only three survived, January tells Robinson and Jimmie that she wishes she had some makeup for her face.<sup>209</sup> "And it was true," she adds,

that while I was on the island I greatly missed my make-up; I do not care to go about with nothing on my face so that everyone can see what is written on it. One of the day-dream fantasies that came to me like homesickness when I was on the island, was a make-up session. In my mind, I would be in my bedroom at home, performing the smoothing and creaming and painting of my face, going through the whole ritual of smoothing and patting, down to the last touch of mascara, taking my leisure, one hour, two hours. Whereas in reality, at home, I make up my face rather quickly, and only when, rarely, the idea seizes me, do I make a morning of it.<sup>210</sup>

This passage depicts femininity as a comforting fantasy, a home it is possible to depart from, a ritual relatively unconnected with reality. It also obliquely implies that

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<sup>207</sup> Annette Keck and Ralph J. Poole, "Editorial: Gender and Humour: Reinventing the Genres of Laughter," *Gender Forum*, no. 33 (2011): 2, [http://genderforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/201133\\_Complete.pdf](http://genderforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/201133_Complete.pdf).

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>209</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 70–71.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

the mask of femininity provides some measure of protection before a woman ventures out into a hostile world. As a comedy of calculated exposure, objectification and spectacle, the female performance of the grotesque dramatises the violation of constant societal surveillance and the murderous violence of the male gaze that “reduces women to the sum total of their body parts.”<sup>211</sup> On a more optimistic note, the female grotesque can embody “the critical and hopeful power of the masquerade”.<sup>212</sup> For Mary Russo, this comic form offers women “possibility”, since to “put on femininity with a vengeance suggests the power of taking it off.”<sup>213</sup> Reading such scenes in Spark alongside Julia Kristeva’s philosophy of abjection may prove a fruitful future endeavour, though it is beyond the scope of this thesis to delve into such a rich and complex theoretical field. Fotini Apostolou sees this kind of exaggerated play with gender expression as Spark carrying the possibilities of mask to their extreme.<sup>214</sup> Since women have been given the power of appearances by men, who make a “favourite practice” of associating women with mask and artificiality, Spark “takes it upon herself to parody this idea.”<sup>215</sup> In doing so, she plays with traditional notions of power, gender and myth, exposing all as constructed nonsenses.<sup>216</sup> While Apostolou writes of Spark’s parodic masquerade in relation to 1968’s *The Public Image*, it is clearly present here, a decade earlier in *Robinson*.

Playing with bodily distortions and facial grimaces, as Spark allows her comic heroine to do, violates traditional social expectations of demure femininity.<sup>217</sup> Indeed, a general disapproval of women playing the clown or acting the fool subsists to this

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<sup>211</sup> Audrey Bilger, *Laughing Feminism: Subversive Comedy in Frances Burney, Maria Edgeworth, and Jane Austen* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1998), 205.

<sup>212</sup> Mary Russo, “Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory,” in *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, ed. Teresa De Lauretis (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1986), 224.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>214</sup> Fotini Apostolou, “Seduction, Simulacra and the Feminine: Spectacles and Images in Muriel Spark’s *The Public Image*,” *Journal of Gender Studies* 9, no. 3 (November 2000): 282, Taylor & Francis Online.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, 282, 283, 287.

<sup>217</sup> Kotthoff, “Gender and Humor,” 5.



day.<sup>218</sup> This is perhaps because, while woman is associated with the body, wielding power over it remains taboo. The physical act of laughter signifies both pleasure and a loss of control. In comedy, the wielder of words has control over their audience, deciding whether and when to bestow pleasure and release. With physical forms like mask and the grotesque, the female comic claims control of her body and over the bodies of others. By provoking pleasure and “flirting with displeasure”,<sup>219</sup> she reveals the depths of her unsanctioned knowledge of the body and all its potential pleasures. According to Margaret Rowe, though, these pleasures are absent from Spark’s work. She writes that Spark’s first novel sets the pattern for her oeuvre, with virtually no sexual content and a detachment from heterosexuality that only increases.<sup>220</sup> Freed from the sensual “problems of the body”, Sparkian heroines are generally “left to grapple with the happier problems [...] of free will and creativity.”<sup>221</sup> “Power over self—and sometimes over others—” she writes, “is what Spark’s women seek. But not the conventional power that comes with sexual activity.”<sup>222</sup> In *Robinson*, Rowe comments, the sexual conflict between January and her male companions is of only minor import.<sup>223</sup> Though game-playing arguably allows January, like other Sparkian heroines, “to ritualize and therefore control their sexuality—and the sexuality of others”, it is her “critical faculty, not her sexuality,” that is at the centre of the male/female contest.<sup>224</sup> Acknowledging the critical commonplace that Spark’s oeuvre in general exhibits a “lack of human affection”, Rowe links this emotional void to her “dismissal of the body, of sexuality.”<sup>225</sup> “Her wit is sharp,” Allan Massie muses on a

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<sup>218</sup> Kotthoff, “Gender and Humor,” 5.

<sup>219</sup> Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai, “Comedy Has Issues,” *Critical Inquiry* 43, no. 2 (Winter 2017): 233, <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/689666>.

<sup>220</sup> Margaret Moan Rowe, “Muriel Spark and the Angel of the Body,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 28, no. 3 (Spring 1987): 171–73, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.1987.9937839>.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, 171–72.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

similar note, “her humour for the most part negligible; there is a lack of warmth. The appeal is to the mind and imagination rather than to the heart. And yet this conventional distinction may be itself distorting.”<sup>226</sup>

Comedy is often understood as an act of power, aggression and agency, requiring affective distance.<sup>227</sup> The common perception of Spark’s comic fiction as emotionally lacking may simply reveal an expectation regarding the sort of fiction women are supposed to produce. It is possible that comic fiction without such sentimental content would not be questioned if produced by a man, whose intellectual detachment is accepted, even expected. It is equally possible that, in avoiding the literature of sentiment and emotion she views as ineffectual,<sup>228</sup> Spark has banished altogether these supposedly feminine attributes. Yet, in looking at these embodied comic moments in *Robinson*, it is clear that the body is, to some extent, embraced by Spark, elevated from its debased position and deployed in order to suggest that gender is either a comforting fiction or a ridiculous performance – but nonetheless a site of power, and even, possible empowerment. This approach differs greatly from the twentieth-century satiric tradition described by Valentine Cunningham. For Cunningham, twentieth-century satirists associated the body with devolution and degradation, focusing with particular revulsion on the desires and functions of the lower body.<sup>229</sup> Motivated by wartime horror and disgust, in much of the literature of this period, humans became animalised, women objectified and the “bad body of the Other”, with its sweat, spit, vomit, piss, shit, was used not just to challenge the ideas of an opponent but to break him into dismembered parts

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<sup>226</sup> Massie, *Muriel Spark*, 91.

<sup>227</sup> Susan Purdie, *Comedy: The Master of Discourse* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), 3, 4, 7.

<sup>228</sup> Spark, “The Desegregation of Art,” 80.

<sup>229</sup> Valentine Cunningham, “Twentieth-century Fictional Satire,” in Quintero, *Companion to Satire*, 405, 407, 409, 415–16.

representative of his mind, soul and ideology.<sup>230</sup> For these modern-day puritans, Cunningham argues, there was an impassable gulf between the mind and body, spirit and matter, with the body condemned as satanic.<sup>231</sup> This analysis, which gives passing mentions to Virginia Woolf and Angela Carter, includes only one female writer of Spark's vintage (Iris Murdoch). Nor does it seem indicative of a female satiric tradition in general. In this chapter alone, we have seen how Spark is working with the categories of female and male, feminine and masculine, in a complex, conflated and comical way. This aspect of the novel is motored by curiosity and critique, but not horror or disgust. And while Rowe is correct that little sexual content exists in *Robinson*, I will argue in chapter four that Spark's novel does in fact subtly address sexuality by suggesting that greater fluidity of mind is needed around issues of sexuality and gender.

In this chapter, I have explored the island setting of *Robinson* as a site of Otherness in which the categories of masculinity and femininity are contrasted, conflated and complicated. Ridiculing the authority figures of this land, Spark provides us with three caricatured "types" in Robinson, Wells and Jimmie, and comic doubles in Ian Brodie and Curly Lonsdale. Spark's use of caricature reduces patriarchal speech acts to mere ventriloquism, highlighting the role language plays in processes of colonisation and control. Extending my reading of the novel's opening paratextual map, I have looked in brief at how Spark uses Defoe's and Wyss' novels to establish her masculine colony and to begin her and her heroine's revisionist quest. Even a cursory comparison of Spark's texts with these classics reveals a scathing critique of the colonising impulse and of authority figures who seek to

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<sup>230</sup> Cunningham, "Twentieth-century Fictional Satire," 405, 408–10, 411, 416.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid., 427.

control people and cultures they perceive as Other. A handful of feminist critics have noted that January's mythological flights of fancy provide her with comfort and some sense of power in this highly controlled world. Developing this criticism, I have considered how Spark embraces feminine materiality and artificiality to create a female comic body that defies conventional femininity and fixed notions of gender. This subversive embodied comedy is, as we shall see, backed by January's virtuosic verbal humour and Spark's disruptive literary feminism. Both will be explored further in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER 2: ACTS OF COMIC DISRUPTION

*Robinson* is a text containing multiple and diverse disruptions. In it, disruptions to canon, convention, genre, narrative, language and form all work together to pose a dizzying challenge to socio-cultural and literary notions of femaleness. A disruptive form by nature, comedy routinely targets structures of power and those who sit atop them. Literary comedy has, in a similar way, delighted in mimicking, ridiculing, satirising and playing with those authors and texts that inhabit the supposedly unassailable pinnacles of canon. As outsiders to this tradition, women's relationship with and response to literary canon and convention has differed to that of men, so their comedy has expressed itself differently. I will begin, in this chapter, by reading January's relationship with Robinson's library as emblematic of the woman writer's relationship with literary canon. Using the intertextuality of satire, parody and revision to feminist effect, Spark blurs genre categories, ruptures the exclusionary boundaries enshrining canon and ridicules antiquated myths of woman that have impeded female authorship. The counter-discursive sphere of speech has long posed a challenge to the masculine dominated sphere of literature, offering an alternative, unofficial and female perspective on history. By tracing such devalued discourses back to their satirical roots, and by drawing on the work of Patricia Meyer Spacks and Christine Neufeld, I will, in this chapter, advance a secular, feminist understanding of Sparkian satire based on a simple but savage verbal virtuosity. Continuing the emphasis on female orality, I will look at how Spark brings the excluded language and underground conventions of female humour into a literary context, disrupting narrative conventions with her

proleptic, metaleptic, metafictional and metaphoric wordplay. Spark also disrupts the comic form, dispensing with the traditional happy ending in favour of an open conclusion, embedded in which is a feminist critique of marriage. A close reading of some key interactions between January and three male characters – Robinson, Jimmie and Ian Brodie – reveals the feminist speech strategies deployed by Spark's protagonist, particularly on the topics of sex and marriage. Supported by the theories of Nancy Walker and Audrey Bilger, I will explore repetition as a strategy of challenge and change. I will also look at how speechlessness and inept speech become strategies of protest and protection when performed by Spark's ever-wily comic heroine.

## A FEMALE INTRUDER IN THE PATRIARCHAL LIBRARY

When January is first shown Robinson's library, she notes with "a snobbish sort of amusement" that books should not be kept behind glass and first editions not be left uncut.<sup>232</sup> Here, Spark allows the *Ex Libris* bookplate imprinted on all of Robinson's books to momentarily interrupt the narrative.<sup>233</sup> This peek at the peritext of Robinson's library tells us that all the literature, philosophy and religion present on the island is written by man, owned by man. The gothic lettering and "dreadful woodcut representing a book open on a table lectern, a quill pen, and an old-fashioned lamp" attest to the age of Robinson's chosen canon.<sup>234</sup> His motto – *Nunquam minus solus quam cum solus* – is also imprinted on each book, implying that Robinson's collection is designed to affirm his beliefs in solitude rather than challenge them in communion. As the ancient language of scholars, associated with the sort of higher learning available only in the past to particular men, these Latin

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<sup>232</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 24.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 24–25.

phrases imply inaccessibility to all but the initiated. Looking at female-penned texts, Barreca finds other instances in which bookish heroines show “disregard for the cultural apparatus set up to protect the sacred word from such scavengers as herself.”<sup>235</sup> These defiant comic characters steal language, “raiding books the way Eve raided the orchard, taking what is not properly her own in order to appropriate the parts she finds fascinating or useful.”<sup>236</sup> In my next chapter, I will devote more time to exploring January as a disobedient Eve/Lilith figure in a parodic revision of the Judaeo-Christian myth of creation.

Raiding literary canon is not just a function of Spark’s protagonist but a favourite technique of Spark herself. Analyses of her novels often begin with an inventory of likely intertextual inspirations and allusions. Analyses of *Robinson*, however rare, are no different. Indeed, the plethora of possibilities provoked by this novel seem to simultaneously activate and confound the customary desire to understand literature via genre classification. Irena Księżopolska’s reading of the novel concentrates on Spark’s mimicry and mockery of the detective story, a genre the author continued to work with throughout her career.<sup>237</sup> Gloria Biamonte argues that detective fiction, much like its frequent attendant, humour, “provides two stories: one absent but real, the other present but relatively insignificant.”<sup>238</sup> In female incarnations particularly, detective fiction proves itself a genre of fluctuating borders, genre renovation and social critique.<sup>239</sup> For Księżopolska, Spark transgresses numerous literary boundaries in *Robinson*, mocking conventions, merging genres and playfully disobeying their implied rules.<sup>240</sup> Aside from Defoe’s novel and amongst

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<sup>235</sup> Barreca, “‘A Difference of Taste in Jokes’,” 297.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid.

<sup>237</sup> Księżopolska, “The Missing Body,” 1–14.

<sup>238</sup> Gloria A. Biamonte, “Funny, Isn’t It?: Testing the Boundaries of Gender and Genre in Women’s Detective Fiction,” in Finney, *Look Who’s Laughing*, 235.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid., 232, 236.

<sup>240</sup> Księżopolska, “The Missing Body,” 3.

many others, she detects elements of Jules Verne's *L'île mystérieuse* (1874), Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None* (1939), Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone* (1868) and William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1610-1611).<sup>241</sup> For Richmond, the novel suggests Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) and William Golding's *The Lord of the Flies* (1954).<sup>242</sup> It mixes aspects of the psychological and religious allegory with elements of the island adventure, the murder mystery and the classic detective story.<sup>243</sup> Preeti Bhatt notes that the events of *Robinson* fall during the same year Golding's novel was published and suggests it contains additional influences from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and *Treasure Island* (1883).<sup>244</sup> Patrick Parrinder finds elements of the Gothic thriller and supernatural fantasy intermingled with the Robinsonade.<sup>245</sup> Bold writes of *Robinson* as a moral fable and religious allegory before admitting that the "various possibilities of interpretation occur simultaneously, alternatives interlock".<sup>246</sup> In chapter four, I will discuss how these possibilities operate as a deliberately diverse feminist strategy. Here, however, it is sufficient to note that not even Spark's characters are clear on what kind of narrative they inhabit. According to January, they are all "on the same island but in different worlds."<sup>247</sup> In Jimmie and Wells, she believes she is "up against two different types of the melodramatic mind; one coloured by romance, the other by crime."<sup>248</sup> Each of her companions seems to believe he is at the centre of a different type of narrative – Wells acts as if he were the mastermind of a crime novel, Jimmie the hero of a romantic quest and Robinson a transcendent iconoclast in search of a one-man utopia. None suspect that they are actually, as this chapter will explore, devices in a

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<sup>241</sup> Księżopolska, "The Missing Body," 3, 6.

<sup>242</sup> Richmond, *Muriel Spark*, 38.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid.

<sup>244</sup> Bhatt, *Experiments in Narrative Technique in the Novels of Muriel Spark*, 54–55.

<sup>245</sup> Parrinder, "Muriel Spark and Her Critics," 27.

<sup>246</sup> Bold, *Muriel Spark*, 47.

<sup>247</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 144.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid.



satiric female revision that collapses the boundaries between such generic categories and between what is and is not considered 'literary'.

Spark's playful relationship with literary tradition is well-known, though whether this relationship is characterised by reverence, critique or equal measures of both is a matter of minor disagreement. For Matthew Wickman, "Spark's writing is less about its conformity to elegant paradigms than the havoc it wreaks on them, and consequently on our cultural and historical bearings."<sup>249</sup> Parrinder, on the other hand, believes that the "cross-fertilisation" of genres present in Spark is simply part of what has "kept the plots of novels novel".<sup>250</sup> Certainly, a "wonderfully confused [...] plundering relish" has been present in novels, particularly those of a satirical bent, from the early modern period.<sup>251</sup> Claudia Kairoff points out that "[a]s women helped develop the novel, satire was among the genres they incorporated into this new prose hybrid."<sup>252</sup> But where the male satiric gaze can be described as "panoptic, sweeping, dominant [...] defining, controlling, dealing out the analyses that hurt, dishing out the critical medicine, the allegedly cathartic purge",<sup>253</sup> the female satiric gaze has been thrice marginalised since its owner is a woman, writer *and* satirist.<sup>254</sup> Walker also notes that, though female and male authors have both sought to revise literary canon and tradition, they have not done so in the same way or for the same reasons.<sup>255</sup> The revisionary tendency in women's literature, she believes, has arisen largely from the exclusion of women from language and literature.<sup>256</sup> With new and

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<sup>249</sup> Matthew Wickman, "Spark, Modernism and Postmodernism," in Gardiner and Maley, *The Edinburgh Companion to Muriel Spark*, 66.

<sup>250</sup> Parrinder, "Muriel Spark and Her Critics," 28.

<sup>251</sup> Cunningham, "Twentieth-century Fictional Satire," 400.

<sup>252</sup> Claudia Thomas Kairoff, "Gendering Satire: Behn to Burney," in Quintero, *Companion to Satire*, 285.

<sup>253</sup> Cunningham, "Twentieth-century Fictional Satire," 430.

<sup>254</sup> Christine Künzle, "The Most Dangerous Presumption: Women Authors and the Problems of Writing Satire," *Gender Forum*, no. 35 (2011): 49, [http://genderforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/201135\\_Complete.pdf#page=50](http://genderforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/201135_Complete.pdf#page=50).

<sup>255</sup> Nancy A. Walker, *The Disobedient Writer: Women and Narrative Tradition* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1995), 2.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

disobedient readings of old texts, meanings become altered, beliefs and assumptions become challenged, and the female writer is able to create a narrative that reflects, not myths written about her, but the truth of her own experience.<sup>257</sup>

Moreover, Walker asserts that

[t]o rework a specific text by a specific author [...] is to exercise a different kind of disobedience, one that questions the singularity and ownership of certain themes, plots, tropes and narrative strategies. Such revisions are a way not only of subverting the traditional text, but also of laying claim to it, entering into dialogue with it on an equal plane.<sup>258</sup>

As established in chapter 1, Spark enters in *Robinson* into a dialogue of equals with at least two canonised grandfathers of English literature – Defoe and Wyss – but her approach is not purely reverent. Revision, like satire and parody, simultaneously enshrines and questions the past.<sup>259</sup> According to Linda Hutcheon, parody serves to

question the authority of any act of writing by locating the discourses of both history and fiction within an ever-expanding intertextual network that mocks any notion of either single origin or simple causality.<sup>260</sup>

In adopting the association-rich island genre, with its attendant connotations of closure, singularity and ownership, Spark compounds her challenge of the stronghold men have for so long claimed over the land of literature. With *Robinson*, Spark and her heroine invade this masculine territory and unapologetically plant a flag on it for womankind.

January is granted access to Robinson's library,<sup>261</sup> but she prefers her journal. It is clear that if any female literature is to exist in this masculine domain, she must write it herself. After her initial tour, she does not enter Robinson's library again until after his supposed death, when she finds the collection "admirable, quite enviable",

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<sup>257</sup> Walker, *The Disobedient Writer*, 3.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>259</sup> Linda Hutcheon, "Intertextuality, Parody, and the Discourses of History," in *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 126, ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>261</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 24.

with “[b]ig names everywhere,” “nothing minor” and “*whole sets of everything*” (emphasis original).<sup>262</sup> The lower shelves of a closed cabinet are “occupied by patristic literature in Latin and Greek, and all the English volumes of the Library of the Fathers”.<sup>263</sup> These enclosed volumes, uncut pages and complete sets all suggest a closed system, one without room for or even any notion of further, future contributions, particularly not from “minor” voices which might exist outside its set masculine sphere. January is again offered access to the library, this time by Jimmie who has taken possession of the collection in Robinson’s absence.<sup>264</sup> But when January does try to adopt an apparatus of authority, viewing the collection through Robinson’s frames, she quite literally causes an earthquake in the world of man.<sup>265</sup> The glasses are barely on her nose before she reports “[t]he books leaped from the shelves and piled over the carpet. Everything on the tables and the desk whirled on to the floor, and even then did not stay still.”<sup>266</sup> Clearly, masculine canon has been unsettled by this massive shift of perspective.

January only opens one of Robinson’s books after her journal has been purloined by Tom Wells. Choosing a novel he has included for its “bibliographic charms”, she immediately becomes irritated by its eighteenth-century typography, hurling it at a nearby sofa.<sup>267</sup> This violent act, along with her derisive irritation and unrepentant consumption of his alcohol, protests Robinson’s neat and reverent categorisation of his canon. It also bears more than a passing resemblance to Virginia Woolf murderously flinging her inkpot at the spectre of the Angel of the House.<sup>268</sup> Spark’s inclusion of a passage of one of Robinson’s novels, another

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<sup>262</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 124.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>268</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Killing the Angel in the House: Seven Essays* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 4.

disruption in the narrative, ridicules the language that has been used to construct women in male-penned literature of the past:

*Now the agonies which affected the mind of Sophia rather augmented than impaired her beauty; for her tears added brightness to her eyes, and her breaths rose higher with her sighs. Indeed, no one hath seen beauty in its highest lustre, who hath never seen it in distress...* <sup>269</sup>

This mischievous moment combines one of the goddesses Spark has earlier evoked with an image of beatific suffering and outdated language that becomes absurd to the point of incomprehensibility. A mere glimpse inside this book tells us we are dealing with the pervasive angel-woman myth Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar identify as one of two major woman myths created by male authors.<sup>270</sup> Such constructions represent the noble selflessness of femininity, the “eternal feminine” that consoles but never complains, moralises but never criticises.<sup>271</sup> These “spiritualized heroines” have no story of their own; they are instead killed into art and remain pure, fixed and perfect forever.<sup>272</sup>

Spark does not give this myth much time or thought, and nor does her heroine. January’s thoughts instead turn to her sisters and how in moments of “special stress” they each react differently.<sup>273</sup> At times, she muses she is like Julia who

spends her life putting discs on and off her electric gramophone, switching on the television, switching it off, pouring herself a drink, taking up a book, throwing it on a nearby sofa, lifting the telephone, then changing her mind.<sup>274</sup>

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<sup>269</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 152.

<sup>270</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1979), 17.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*, 21–22.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*, 24–25.

<sup>273</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 152.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*

At other times, after “some event, such as a play, or a letter with a surprise cheque”, she resembles Agnes who indulges in “fat-headed domestic triviality”.<sup>275</sup> None of these real women possess “breafts” that rise with “fighs” or eyes of tearful “brightnefs”. Nor do these differentiated characters react the same as each other or consistently in every circumstance. The two juxtaposed depictions of womankind laughingly dismiss the angel myth of magnificent suffering, highlighting her antiquated nature by referencing modern gadgets and freedoms, and replacing her with women who deal with stress in ordinary, human, trivial and changeable ways. The domestic triviality of women’s lives becomes here, not proof of their insignificance, but rather an antidote to the unreality of female myths imposed by socio-cultural ideals through masculine literature. This kind of deconstruction and disruption of female myths via trivial, domestic realism is a common feature of women’s post-war comedy, offering a sense of group solidarity, “some flexibility in deviating from the impossible cultural standard without guilt or shame” and “a defense against more destructive alternatives, such as madness or suicide.”<sup>276</sup>

Working with convention and within tradition, as Spark does in *Robinson*, is an essential element of both parody and satire. As “committed intertextualists,” satirists “keep looking back, establishing self-justifying lineages, lineages that keep growing.”<sup>277</sup> Indeed, satire’s “generic generosity” means it can make itself at home on any vehicle, whether farcical, essayistic, elegiac, Gothic, erotic, domestic, historical, topographical, documentary, social-realist, magic-realist, science-fiction, fantasy or detective fiction.<sup>278</sup> The intertextuality required by parody and satire alters, however, when performed by a female writer. Utilising many of these genres, the abounding

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<sup>275</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 152.

<sup>276</sup> Zita Dresner, “Domestic Comic Writers,” in *Women’s Comic Visions*, ed. June Sochen (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 97, 99, 101.

<sup>277</sup> Cunningham, “Twentieth-century Fictional Satire,” 404.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid.

literary allusions and genre conventions Spark exploits in *Robinson* pose enigmatic clues, some of them red herrings. Altogether, they indicate how disinterested this author is in maintaining the sacred boundaries enshrining literary canon and tradition. She is interested instead in breaching these boundaries, in compelling tradition to allow improving access to the disruptive female comic voice. Spark specialises, Barreca states, in delivering “narratives that undercut the system while remaining within it”.<sup>279</sup> Her comedy routinely refuses closure, parodies convention, inverts stereotypes and reshapes reader expectations.<sup>280</sup> In the next section, I will explore how Spark’s satire in particular departs from the conventions of this typically masculine genre, creating an oral female satire of joy and offense.

## A SPARKIAN SATIRE OF STING

In her journal entry dated the first of July, January sets about recording the history of the man she is considering marrying. Significantly, this record actually becomes the story of the mysterious disappearance of Jimmie’s mother, cast from her father’s house after daring to use salt on her meal.<sup>281</sup> Choosing revolt and exile over unjust male domination, this nameless woman offers a fleeting glimpse of Lilith, the original woman, the first female revolutionary and the model for the female monster myth Gilbert and Gubar posit as the opposite of the female angel myth.<sup>282</sup> January admits, “I don’t know whether this particular story is true”, nor does she seem to care.<sup>283</sup> Though “possible”, it may merely be part of Jimmie’s wooing strategy as

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<sup>279</sup> Barreca, “The Ancestral Laughter of the Streets,” 235.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>281</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 92–93.

<sup>282</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 17, 35.

<sup>283</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 93.

he may have sensed I am a pushover for a story, that I would far rather have a present of a good story than, say, a bunch of flowers, and will more or less always take kindly to the raconteur type.<sup>284</sup>

Jimmie is thus the only man on the island who attempts to speak to January in the language of her people. Oral discourse – storytelling, folklore and gossip – have historically been the modes through which women have communicated their unauthorised perspectives on life and culture.<sup>285</sup> Patricia Spacks argues that diary writing, like gossip, has been constructed as a female genre that sits outside of canon, on the “borderlands” or “edges of what our culture agrees to call ‘literature’”.<sup>286</sup> Indeed, the journal is described by Adrienne Rich as a “profoundly female, and feminist, genre”.<sup>287</sup> The perspectives expressed in these modes frequently deviated from the facts Robinson holds so sacred, indulging in pseudo-facts, interpretation and “a variety of moral investigation” that is typical perhaps only of women.<sup>288</sup> Since they have been “largely deprived of social power and filling limited functions in the public world,” women have found that gossip offers them “the greatest possible expressive possibility while remaining bound by rigid social actuality”.<sup>289</sup> Blurring the boundaries between the private and public, the gossip (now gendered as female) offers an alternative view of history, “a record of interpretations preserved mainly by oral tradition, concerning domestic affairs, small events, childbirth rather than war and pestilence”.<sup>290</sup> In taking possession of these “private histories”, gossip communities claim for themselves the power to “control history.”<sup>291</sup> In allowing elements of these unofficial discourses, gossip and diary-writing, to penetrate the

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<sup>284</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 93.

<sup>285</sup> Patricia Meyer Spacks, “In Praise of Gossip,” *The Hudson Review* 35, no. 1 (1982): 30–32, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3851309>.

<sup>286</sup> Patricia Meyer Spacks, “Borderlands: Letters and Gossip,” *The Georgia Review* 37, no. 4 (1983): 791, [www.jstor.org/stable/41398596](https://www.jstor.org/stable/41398596).

<sup>287</sup> Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966-1978* (London: Virago, 1979), 217.

<sup>288</sup> Spacks, “In Praise of Gossip,” 27, 34.

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*, 22, 30.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

illustrious veneer of literature, Spark further disrupts the boundaries around what is considered high and low, masculine and feminine literature. She offers, as many feminist humourists do, a female perspective on the world that is designed to affirm an experience women recognise and initiate men brave enough into a new worldview.<sup>292</sup>

Gossip and satire both manage the potential exposure of secrets. Melinda Rabb argues that satire and gossip are closely related breeds of “verbal espionage and secret-telling”,<sup>293</sup> which

reveal what an official account might wish to conceal. Both generate alternative versions of things, versions that acquire a kind of underground subversive power and that disperse univocal meaning or interpretation into contending possibilities. Both paradoxically can also create a sense of community through the sharing of secrets...<sup>294</sup>

Thought to possess a healing function for women, even the potential cruelty of gossip can be said to possess a subversive feminist purpose since it violates “the cardinal tenet of female morality: care for others”.<sup>295</sup> Indeed, satire and gossip may not just withdraw care but cause harm. When speaking in praise of satire and ridicule, Spark declared that the art of ridicule “can penetrate to the marrow. It can leave a salutary scar. It is unnerving. It can paralyse its object”.<sup>296</sup> This statement reflects the idea that comedy is essentially an aggressive act.<sup>297</sup> In *Robinson*, January recounts an incident in which she turned her rapier sharp wit on Ian Brodie and his staunch anti-Marian dogma. Brodie’s quarrel with the worship of the Virgin Mary as a pagan goddess and her popularity over her son is dismissed by January with the often feminised term of “carping” while his argument is rejected as mere

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<sup>292</sup> Merrill, “Feminist Humor,” 275.

<sup>293</sup> Melinda Alliker Rabb, “The Secret Life of Satire,” in Quintero, *Companion to Satire*, 575.

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid.*, 576.

<sup>295</sup> Spacks, “In Praise of Gossip,” 25, 34–35.

<sup>296</sup> Spark, “The Desegregation of Art,” 81.

<sup>297</sup> Alice Sheppard, “Continuity and Change: The Cultural Context of Women’s Humor,” in *Transforming Humor Research: In Search of a Woman’s Tradition* (The Annual Meeting of the National Women’s Studies Association, Maryland, USA, 1989), 10, <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED318652>.



“spasmodic rationalization”.<sup>298</sup> A critical and idiosyncratic believer, Spark practised Catholicism on her own terms,<sup>299</sup> and was intensely funny about religion with “tortuous theological debates” constantly interrupted by her “cracking irreverent jokes.”<sup>300</sup> Nonetheless, since satire “cannot function without a standard against which readers can compare its subject”,<sup>301</sup> critics have often looked to her religious beliefs to provide the moral framework for her satire.<sup>302</sup> I would like to suggest an alternative approach. As established in chapter 1, the character of January embodies Spark’s “pagan aesthetic”, revealing a sympathy for the pagan, the magical and pre-ancestral.<sup>303</sup> It seems pertinent then to look to the ancient, magical roots of satire for an alternative interpretation of Sparkian satire.

*Robinson* the novel, as written by January, is, amongst other things, a work of gossip. It responds to and sheds light on rumours circulated by the press. It records the verbal slander slanted by January at Robinson, Jimmie, Wells, Brodie, Curly and the masculine culture they each represent in their own way. Historically, there has been some anxiety around differentiating “satire’s noble masculinity from less-valued feminine speech acts like gossip and slander.”<sup>304</sup> But modern literary satire is now believed to have stemmed from medieval poetry and flying competitions, public displays of abuse that remained popular in Spark’s country of origin long after dying out in England.<sup>305</sup> These virtuosic exchanges of invective were based on the widespread belief that words were weapons that could inflict significant

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<sup>298</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 79, 80.

<sup>299</sup> Hosmer, “An Interview with Dame Muriel Spark,” 129.

<sup>300</sup> Stannard, *Muriel Spark: The Biography*, 155.

<sup>301</sup> Ruben Quintero, “Introduction: Understanding Satire,” in Quintero, *Companion to Satire*, 3.

<sup>302</sup> Bradbury, “Muriel Spark’s Fingernails,” 241–50; Kemp, *Muriel Spark*, 13–16; Massie, “Calvinism and Catholicism in Muriel Spark,” 94–107; Jude V. Nixon, “[A] Virginal Tongue Hold’: Hopkins’s *The Wreck of the Deutschland* and Muriel Spark’s *The Girls of Slender Means*,” *Renascence* 57, no. 4 (Summer 2005): 299–333, ProQuest; Randisi, “Muriel Spark and Satire,” 132–45.

<sup>303</sup> Cheyette, *Muriel Spark*, 31.

<sup>304</sup> Rabb, “The Secret Life of Satire,” 575.

<sup>305</sup> Christine Neufeld, “Speakerly Women and Scribal Men,” *Oral Tradition* 14, no. 2 (1999): 424–25, [http://journal.oraltradition.org/files/articles/14ii/8\\_neufeld.pdf](http://journal.oraltradition.org/files/articles/14ii/8_neufeld.pdf).

physical or social harm.<sup>306</sup> In these rituals, verbal prowess and knowledge display became conflated with honesty and victory.<sup>307</sup> The public nature and aggressively sexual tone of these medieval battles ensured that they remained male-dominated affairs,<sup>308</sup> although women in some pre- and post-industrial cultures have indulged in similar behaviours in private.<sup>309</sup> Moreover, Neufeld notes, the attempt to bar women from the sphere of literature and banish them to the debased sphere of gossip, deceitful, illiterate speech did not have the desired effect since the literature produced by many male writers endowed women with such verbal virtuosity that it betrayed a lingering fear of the female sex as a discursive threat.<sup>310</sup>

January certainly presents as a discursive threat when she recalls her response to Ian Brodie's anti-Marian stance:

After that, I seldom argued with Ian lest he should win the argument. He could support himself with a range of theological reference unknown to me, and which I simply did not trust him to handle rightly. [...] Agnes once told me that her husband was sexually impotent [...] To this day, I vaguely feel that Ian's impotence is in some way bound up with his suspicions of the Blessed Virgin, which he termed jealousy for the True Faith.<sup>311</sup>

With this passage, Spark's heroine annihilates her opponent by dismissing his faith, mistrusting his knowledge and, finally, by insulting his manhood. This is the ultimate fear for men, that "the unruly tongue may master the unruly phallus by telling stories about it".<sup>312</sup> January makes her victory complete by writing her invective down, combining the power of both oral and literary traditions. Diaries, letters and autobiographies historically have been, not just a source of information on the

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<sup>306</sup> Neufeld, "Speakerly Women and Scribal Men," 425.

<sup>307</sup> Ibid.

<sup>308</sup> Ibid.

<sup>309</sup> Kotthoff, "Gender and Humour," 14.

<sup>310</sup> Neufeld, "Speakerly Women and Scribal Men," 425.

<sup>311</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 79–80.

<sup>312</sup> Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Gossip* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 137.

buried, unofficial histories of women's lives, but a mode that includes women.<sup>313</sup> January's journal is this "alternative kind of data",<sup>314</sup> offering an alternative, female view on the history and happenings of Robinson. More importantly, the "celebration of verbal virtuosity", the "poetic magic of the word" is, in Bold's mind, the entire moral point of Spark's work.<sup>315</sup> It acts as "an antidote to the poisonous spread of atrocious acts," turning defeatism into determinism.<sup>316</sup> Barreca similarly writes that the secret "play of thought and action" that January refers to in her opening is the most significant aspect of Spark's comedy.<sup>317</sup> For her, Spark's work is implicitly linked with "the primitive ritual of exorcising evil" and "the power of the marginal and magical", a power women have greater access to than men due to their marginal status.<sup>318</sup> Spacks similarly believes that there is a "forbidden joy", "concealed power" and particularly "female magic" to women's verbal play.<sup>319</sup> This potent verbal play is key to a secular and feminist understanding of Sparkian satire. By understanding her satire via theories of female orality, it becomes clear that, while her heroine is penning a novel of ruthless gossip, Spark is penning one of disruptive feminist satire.

## DISRUPTING NARRATIVE AND KILLING CODES

As linguistically disruptive and explosive as female comedy can be, it is equally intimate and conversational in tone. The relegation of women to the private sphere has for the most part kept female humour in the realm of the personal, unofficial and marginal. The underground status of female humour has thus

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<sup>313</sup> Spacks, "Borderlands: Letters and Gossip," 791–92.

<sup>314</sup> Ibid., 792.

<sup>315</sup> Bold, *Muriel Spark*, 32.

<sup>316</sup> Ibid.

<sup>317</sup> Barreca, "The Ancestral Laughter of the Streets," 228.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid., 236.

<sup>319</sup> Spacks, "In Praise of Gossip," 31, 33, 38.

supported a sense of female confidentiality and community.<sup>320</sup> The language used by the female literary humourist often assumes a “shared experience between writer and reader”, adopting direct address or even “gossiping to the reader”.<sup>321</sup> Spark’s novel begins with the phrase “If you ask me” as though answering a question posed by the reader or beginning in the middle of a casual conversation.<sup>322</sup> Aside from the proliferation of ‘I’s and ‘my’s expected of first person address, there are a significant number of ‘you’s in this opening section. “You have read about the incident in the papers,” January narrates in the second person address that will intermittently return throughout the novel.<sup>323</sup> This statement implies former knowledge of a much discussed event that is at last to be put to rights for a highly expectant audience. This type of address features frequently in female amateur detective fictions in which protagonists dialogue with current events, juxtaposing public and private responses and critically comparing the observable facts of a matter with her comic vision of them.<sup>324</sup> January’s tone is not that of a superior with specialised knowledge but the tone of a friend who is finally ready to tell her side of the story. It is the tone of an equal, one inviting intimacy and identification.

To cement this relationship, January reveals that “[t]hrough my journal I nearly came to my death”.<sup>325</sup> This early giveaway to the ensuing mystery is typical of Spark. The author’s infamous use of narrative prolepsis is described by Patricia Waugh as a distancing tactic that allows the reader to view subsequent narrative events through the lens of dramatic irony.<sup>326</sup> For David Lodge, such narrative interventions

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<sup>320</sup> Walker, *A Very Serious Thing*, 131.

<sup>321</sup> Ibid., 129, 131.

<sup>322</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 7.

<sup>323</sup> Ibid.

<sup>324</sup> Biamonte, “Funny, Isn’t It?,” 238.

<sup>325</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 7.

<sup>326</sup> Patricia Waugh, “Muriel Spark and the Metaphysics of Modernity: Art, Secularization, and Psychosis,” in *Muriel Spark: Twenty-First-Century Perspectives*, ed. David Herman (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2010), 91.

constantly check any inclination we may have to 'lose ourselves' in the story or to sink into emotional identification with any of the characters; it detaches us from the experience presented and makes us think about its meaning, or meanings.<sup>327</sup>

Peter Robert Brown similarly notes that Spark deliberately creates unreliable narrators and narrative discrepancies as a way of illustrating how all narratives offer only partial truth and interrogating the ways in which stories are told.<sup>328</sup> This could all be true of *Robinson* as well. Yet, however unreliable her narrators, however non-teleological her narratives, they are invariably winning. Her cast of capricious female narrators (along with a few male) and her enigmatic use of prolepsis may not be techniques designed to distance the reader but rather to draw them in. Though it is often understood as women failing at being funny, female humour routinely violates story sequencing rules and frequently employs a collaborative rather than individualistic storytelling style.<sup>329</sup> Both features of female humour contribute to the weaving of a story in which the importance of plot is superseded by the reader's intimate relationship with an entertaining narrator. Spark can thus be seen bringing the intimate, secretive, "excluded language"<sup>330</sup> of female humour out of the private sphere and into a public, literary sphere where it can be better recognised, understood and enjoyed.

As well as predictive prolepsis, Spark is infamous for her disruptive metafictional and metaleptic interjections. Her narratives are peppered with sly narratorial commentary that her reader cannot necessarily trust and cynical reflections on the production of a particular text, or of fiction in general. Though much has been written on her idiosyncratic narrative style, as Lisa Harrison notes, "her contribution to metafictional play and narrative ironies" often falls out with

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<sup>327</sup> Lodge, "The Uses and Abuses of Omniscience," 126.

<sup>328</sup> Brown, "'There's Something about Mary,'" 233, 236–37.

<sup>329</sup> Crawford, "On Conversational Humor," 18.

<sup>330</sup> Walker, *A Very Serious Thing*, 67.

conventional criticisms that try to fence her fiction into a Catholic or Scottish context.<sup>331</sup> James Bailey agrees that Spark has been overlooked as an experimental writer whose metafictional and metaleptic interjections challenge notions of literary realism and structures of patriarchal control.<sup>332</sup> In a refreshingly feminist reading of *The Driver's Seat* (1970), *Not To Disturb* (1971) and one of her plays, he writes that these elements, along with the resolute objectification of the *nouveau roman* (new novel) trend, reveal a preoccupation with themes of gender and agency and a tension “between private and public performances, with bodies neatly inscribed within oppressive cultural narratives (and those deemed to be deviant for existing outside of them), and with the violent, sinister erasure of the female subject.”<sup>333</sup> This ‘anti-novel’ trend also allowed Spark “to invert the inequalities of narrative, which determine the history of ‘the English novel.’”<sup>334</sup> Taking a similarly refreshing approach, Gutkin explores Spark’s particular set of narrative techniques, her “playful cruelty” and “attitudinal irony”, as a form of camp metafiction.<sup>335</sup> While the sort of metaleptic violations Spark delights in are games that are “by now a familiar part of the history of both English and American postwar fiction, and even tend to seem rather dated,” Gutkin notes that “with a handful of exceptions, the Anglophone metafiction of the sixties, seventies, and eighties [...] was by male authors” and “inextricably bound up with a kind of literary machismo.”<sup>336</sup> Spark’s style, in contrast, “partakes recognizably of queer and of feminine literary precedents”.<sup>337</sup> Though many queer critics have attempted in recent decades to reclaim the gay, largely male art form of camp from heterosexual reappropriation, Gutkin’s interpretation of Spark’s

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<sup>331</sup> Lisa Harrison, “‘The Magazine That Is Considered the Best in the World’: Muriel Spark and the *New Yorker*,” in Herman, *Muriel Spark: Twenty-First-Century Perspectives*, 40.

<sup>332</sup> Bailey, “Salutary Scars,” 35.

<sup>333</sup> Ibid.

<sup>334</sup> McQuillan, “Introduction: ‘I Don’t Know Anything about Freud,’” 3.

<sup>335</sup> Gutkin, “Muriel Spark’s Camp Metafiction,” 57.

<sup>336</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>337</sup> Ibid.

favourite literary motifs is significant given this thesis' focus on gender. For him, her famous shifts of chronology, habitual use of the early giveaway and penchant for judgemental, jokey narrators are linked to a form of irony that understands gender and sexuality as performative and to rituals of masquerade that celebrate triviality without professing disappointment.<sup>338</sup>

In *Robinson*, Spark adopts a first-person narrative style, reducing the potential for extradiegetic intrusions. But she still manages to include at least one glaring example when January stumbles across an advertisement in one of Wells' occultist magazines that reads: "MURIEL THE MARVEL: with her X-ray eyes. *Can read your very soul*".<sup>339</sup> Suddenly, entertaining equal morphs into shrewd interrogator. With this jarring comic intrusion, the author stares out of her text at the reader, threatening to breach the boundaries of the reader-writer relationship and read them right back. The invisible reader becomes visible, as does the disembodied author, leaving no one in doubt of her gender. Reading and writing are often solitary pursuits but Spark intrudes on this assumed privacy, deliberately overstepping the bounds every woman writer does when putting pen to paper. She makes visible the female writer, her straightforward gaze daring her audience to disapprove of her work. By revealing herself, she reveals the power an author wields over a reader, cautioning against this reality-forming, manipulative dynamic. This version of herself is heightened, dramatised, sensationalised. She laughs at mythologies of woman by giving herself a ridiculous, magical power and mocks established literary conventions by wilfully disobeying them. This is, in Gutkin's words, a highly stylised Möbius-strip-like moment in which "you think you are looking at [the text], but really *it* is looking at *you*"

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<sup>338</sup> Gutkin, "Muriel Spark's Camp Metafiction," 55–56.

<sup>339</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 61.

(emphasis original).<sup>340</sup> For Bailey, these moments in which the boundaries of literary reality are breached, are part of a feminist strategy that seeks “not to abandon realism but to redefine it, presenting fresh challenges to sinister structures of containment and control.”<sup>341</sup> In this one, Spark both inhabits her text and escapes it. She opens up literature, invades it – then turns the spotlight on her reader, making sure they are paying close attention. In chapter 4, I will explore the idea that comedy requires some level of audience participation and that feminist comedy seeks to shift the attitude of its audience. Here, we have seen how Spark’s infamous literary tactics, so often understood via overly complex theories of postmodern fragmentation and temporality, may be understood as experimental strategies that dismantle literary reality in order to condemn male control and claim female agency. They may alternatively be understood as a form of metafictional camp that revels in the trivial and dramatises self and gender. Or they may simply be understood as a reflection of the unattended attributes of female humour.

Spark is one of many woman writers to have transformed traditional plots into alternative tales of female agency and power.<sup>342</sup> This thesis argues that her absurd-ing of canon and convention, along with her parody of male-penned female myths, aligns her with an extensive female revisionist anti-tradition. Conventional criticism has often stopped short of realising or investigating this aspect of her work. Alan Bold writes that “the humorous interpretation of a great tradition is what makes Spark special; she renews the past by means of a modernist sensibility that glories in irony, paronomasia, parody, psychological shock.”<sup>343</sup> Cheyette similarly notes that she “constantly incorporates literary clichés into her novels in a redemptive bid to breathe

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<sup>340</sup> Gutkin, “Muriel Spark’s Camp Metafiction,” 59, 73.

<sup>341</sup> Bailey, “Salutary Scars,” 49.

<sup>342</sup> Walker, *The Disobedient Writer*, 49–50.

<sup>343</sup> Bold, *Muriel Spark*, 27.



new life into them.”<sup>344</sup> Waugh observes in passing that Spark draws attention to similes that have become dead through habitual use, helping readers to see the world anew.<sup>345</sup> According to theories of feminist comedy though, which will be further explored in chapter 4, regeneration and renewal are not the aim of much female comic literature as this implies a continuation of established, entrenched patterns rather than change and improvement.<sup>346</sup> Barreca writes that the female comic writer takes pleasure “not from the perpetuation of the familiar but from its destruction”.<sup>347</sup> She engages not in the perfunctory repetition of convention but in the deliberate deployment of “surprises, disruptions, reversals, disunity and disharmony”.<sup>348</sup> It is this disruptive, destructive energy that Barreca believes inspires women writers to revive “dead” metaphors by “attaching a buried, literal meaning to what is intended to be inert and meaningless”.<sup>349</sup> In doing so, they do not restore old codes but rather break the code that killed them.<sup>350</sup> Calling on the theory of Gilbert and Gubar, Barreca posits that this strategy arises from a need to subvert the inherited metaphors women have had to live with, or live out, for centuries.<sup>351</sup> In defamiliarising links between the literal and the symbolic and rolling back accepted language shifts, women writers displace the constructed but naturalised mythologies of woman encoded in patriarchal language and literature.<sup>352</sup> Their “use of metaphor, as well as their use of comedy, is disruptive in its refusal to accept the conventions which propagate the language of the father.”<sup>353</sup> Since “[t]he symbolic order – the ‘highest’

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<sup>344</sup> Cheyette, *Muriel Spark*, 39.

<sup>345</sup> Waugh, “Muriel Spark and the Metaphysics of Modernity,” 6.

<sup>346</sup> Barreca, “‘Untamed and Unabashed’,” 19.

<sup>347</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>348</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>349</sup> Regina Barreca, “Metaphor-into-Narrative: Being Very Careful with Words,” in Barreca, *Last Laughs*, 244.

<sup>350</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.

<sup>351</sup> *Ibid.*, 245, 249.

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid.*, 253.

order – is linked to the masculine and to language”, to play with language is “to play with the authority of the symbolic/masculine view”.<sup>354</sup>

A key example of this kind of codebreaking paronomasia is Spark’s re-literalising of the scapegoated goat that refers back to Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*. Elaborate explanations have abounded on the meaning of Defoe’s goat and Spark’s goat. David Marshall writes of Crusoe’s encounter with the goat as a terrifying encounter with otherness, best reconciled by the goat’s death.<sup>355</sup> Little writes of the death of Spark’s goat as “a crude, mocking sacrifice,” an inverted and parodic ritual that allows Robinson to stage his Christ-like death and resurrection.<sup>356</sup> On a purely linguistic level, however, the death of Bella the Goat, undoes the symbolism of the term ‘scapegoat’ by making a scapegoat of an actual goat. The term is returned to its ancient, biblical roots when Robinson punishes the animal so that he might escape the ramifications of his own sins. Expanding this re-literalisation practice from the linguistic to the structural, Barreca coins the term metaphor-into-narrative to describe a specifically feminist strategy that takes a maxim, metaphor, simile or cliché and “plays it out in the plot of the text”.<sup>357</sup> Spark, she states, is a frequent and accomplished purveyor of metaphor-into-narrative.<sup>358</sup> Though her literalisation tactics have been noted by critics, they have not been explored in detail.<sup>359</sup> Writing on one of her short stories, Barreca remarks that, in translating metaphor into structure, “Spark makes literal what has come to be disregarded as simply conventional, reconnecting the signifier and the signified in order to explode meaning.”<sup>360</sup>

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<sup>354</sup> Barreca, “Metaphor-into-Narrative,” 254.

<sup>355</sup> Marshall, “Autobiographical Acts in *Robinson Crusoe*,” 909.

<sup>356</sup> Little, *Comedy and the Woman Writer*, 115.

<sup>357</sup> Barreca, “Metaphor-into-Narrative,” 243, 246.

<sup>358</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.

<sup>359</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>360</sup> *Ibid.*

As already noted, *Robinson* takes the phrase “a man’s world” and literalises it on a small scale. This man’s world has its own patriarch, its own doctrine, even its own library of canonical texts. It is a modern rendering of what the world would be like if women were banished from it.<sup>361</sup> Yet when Jimmie spouts John Donne’s aphorism, “No man’s is an island,” January leaps on this “dead” metaphor, twists and literalises it.<sup>362</sup> “Some are,” she replies, “Their only ground of meeting is concealed under the sea. If words mean anything, and islands exist, then some people are islands.”<sup>363</sup> This small exchange does several things at once. It incorporates yet another literary allusion from the canon Spark rejoices in disrupting. It refutes an aphorism commonly attributed to the Christian ideal of fellowship. Flouting the time-honoured conventions of the Robinsonade, it refuses to depict in Robinson’s rabble a utopian society of comradeship and co-operation. Furthermore, this exchange disrupts “our prepared interpretative strategies” by offering an alternative interpretation of a known and accepted cliché.<sup>364</sup> In terms of character, it demonstrates a verbal virtuosity that positions January as “Robinson’s equal and rival, someone who is also able to infuse words with meanings other than their origins”.<sup>365</sup> What’s more, in an odd sort of metaleptic moment, we can almost hear Spark defending the surrealistic premise of her novel. This kind of “creative word play” is a particular feature of conversational humor between women.<sup>366</sup> It also encapsulates Barreca’s perception of female literary comedy in that it delivers all at once a slice of disruption and disunity, a swift reversal followed by an explosion of meaning.

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<sup>361</sup> Bhatt, *Experiments in Narrative Technique in the Novels of Muriel Spark*, 175.

<sup>362</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 22.

<sup>363</sup> Ibid.

<sup>364</sup> Barreca, “Metaphor-into-Narrative,” 243.

<sup>365</sup> Książopolska, “The Missing Body,” 9.

<sup>366</sup> Crawford, “On Conversational Humor,” 18.

## REPEAT AFTER HIM: MOCKING THE LORDS OF CREATION

Repetition and mimicry are comedy staples that have become, for many female authors, feminist strategies of comic critique. They can be seen at work in January's imitation of Robinson's credo "Stick to facts" and in the final verbal skirmish between her and the man she describes as an aspirant puppet-master.<sup>367</sup> During this exchange, Robinson's cagey post-disappearance catchphrase of "It was only to be expected" infuriates January, but when she confronts him, he tells her that she is "full of suspicions" and implacably denies that his motives are simple or warrant explanation.<sup>368</sup> More important to this analysis than her allowing his son religious freedom is the way Spark's protagonist uses Robinson's own words against him:

I said, 'I have taught the child the rosary.'  
 He said, 'I did not think you would do that.'  
 I said, 'It was only to be expected. I made a very nice rosary for him from the amber beads among the salvage.'  
 'The salvage is not your property,' he said helplessly.  
 'There was no one to guard the salvage and so I helped myself. It was only to be—'  
 'Miguel's religion was not your business,' he said.  
 'True,' I said, 'it was yours. But I charge no fee.'  
 'Did you do this to revenge yourself in some way? What exactly was your reason? That you wanted to gain influence over the boy? Was it to feed your possessive instincts? Some unconscious urge? Was it—?'  
 'I see no call to tear myself to bits over motives,' I said. 'They are never simple. I am happy to say I have taught the child the rosary.'  
 'What else have you taught him? Have you put something against me into his mind? He has been strange with me since my return.'  
 'You are full of suspicions,' I said.<sup>369</sup>

This altercation, which does not end without January once more repeating, "It was only to be expected," employs a typical comic device to forward a feminist message. As Barreca points out, "repetition of the language of the powerful by the mouths of

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<sup>367</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 78, 165.

<sup>368</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>369</sup> *Ibid.*, 166–67.

the powerless is a staple for much humor, particularly satire”.<sup>370</sup> The effect of such mimicry changes when the voice is female as

[e]ven when the woman appears to repeat or mime, she inevitably mimics and mocks [...] The more literal the repetition by a woman, the further language moves from the masculine authoritative discourse [...] The gesture of imitation is not flattering but viciously challenging.<sup>371</sup>

By paying ironic lip service to Robinson’s aloof philosophy, January simultaneously subverts it, protesting his control of an innocent victim to whom he has denied information, choice and voice. Though the child January is ostensibly defending is Miguel, critics have noted that Robinson is initially a parental figure to her as well.<sup>372</sup> If so, then he is one in a line of incompetent father figures female comic writers have created in order to “expose the inadequacy of figures who are given power simply because they are male.”<sup>373</sup> According to Bilger, this female comic creation is especially subversive since “an author who ridiculed parental authority offered a direct challenge to society at large”.<sup>374</sup> Furthermore, in drawing attention to cycles of reproduction, and the artifice they produce, repetition serves not just as a challenge but as a means of stimulating social change. As the vessels through which the human race reproduces itself, women are perhaps particularly attuned to cycles of reproduction, not to mention keenly aware of the irony of their exclusion from full participation in the cultures they birthed. They are, therefore, uniquely qualified to suggest breaking the chain of cultural reproduction in order to produce a new and improved world order. As a rhetorical strategy, repetition “marks the debate between

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<sup>370</sup> Barreca, “‘A Difference of Taste in Jokes’,” 292.

<sup>371</sup> Ibid.

<sup>372</sup> Bhatt, *Experiments in Narrative Technique in the Novels of Muriel Spark*, 57; Ohmann, “Muriel Spark’s *Robinson*,” 72.

<sup>373</sup> Bilger, *Laughing Feminism*, 135.

<sup>374</sup> Ibid.

the status quo and change.”<sup>375</sup> Pivotal to theories of feminist comedy, change – individual and collective – will form the focus of my final two chapters.

Not content with mocking father figures, Spark, like many female writers before her, took to mocking potential husbands as well. Marriage is not a major theme in Spark’s fiction; it is consistently denied narrative centrality. Rather, her novels tend to concentrate on professional women in strange but professional contexts. In the post-war period in which women were being ushered back into the kitchen and female comic writers were applying their frustrated creative minds to the genre of domestic fiction,<sup>376</sup> this alone makes Muriel Spark significant. Though her professionally-inclined heroines are usually offered the option of heterosexual union, they ultimately refuse it. In *Robinson*, January has already been married and widowed – the marriage lasted six months and was instigated by a bet, she impartially recaps.<sup>377</sup> With this, the experience is relegated to a footnote in her history and the institution to a deceptive sham. She tells her reader, however, that Jimmie is “always saying, ‘If I give my candid opinion, is providential that you are not consumed in the aeroplane so as to marry me.’”<sup>378</sup> This absurd proposal is itself enough to qualify him as one of the fops or fools that female comic writers have routinely created in order to mock the notion of male superiority.<sup>379</sup> January does consider accepting this proposal, although only to annoy Ian Brodie and amuse the “dry-eyed poets and drifters” who would delight in her fetching “into captivity so exceptional and well-spoken a bird as Jimmie.”<sup>380</sup> Once again blurring the boundaries between genders, Spark has January apply the feminised term of ‘bird’ to a male, as she does when referring to Robinson as a ‘headmistress’, to Brodie’s speech as

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<sup>375</sup> DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending*, 164–65.

<sup>376</sup> Dresner, “Domestic Comic Writers,” 93–114.

<sup>377</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 24.

<sup>378</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>379</sup> Bilger, *Laughing Feminism*, 119.

<sup>380</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 92.

‘carping’ and to Wells’ bandages as a ‘corset’.<sup>381</sup> There is a subtle inversion in this as there is in the characterisation of marriage as a form of captivity in which she would be the captor rather than the captive. In the end, Jimmie’s protective male posturing proves empty and his loyalty conditional. January also values her autonomy too much, stating that “I like to be in a position to choose, I like to be in control of my relationships with people.”<sup>382</sup>

The power of choice and the right of refusal have been central to women’s depiction of the marriage market for centuries.<sup>383</sup> “To men,” Bilger writes, “belonged all power of choice; to women at most the negative power of refusal.”<sup>384</sup> Awareness of this imbalance led to the comic proposal scene – typically between a well-educated suitor and commonsensical heroine – becoming a fixture in female-penned fiction.<sup>385</sup> According to Bilger, as important as the heroine’s right of refusal is the “sexist nonsense” she laughs at in the process.<sup>386</sup> Attributing sexist insults or assumptions to male comic characters allowed female authors to mock the “lords of creation” and incite readers to rethink the very notion of gender-based social privileges.<sup>387</sup> From her place in the twentieth century, January does not have to work as hard as past heroines did to exert their right of refusal but she does have to listen to a good deal of “sexist nonsense” as Jimmie laments his lack of luck with English ladies. Her responses are minimal and non-committal, reflecting the tactic of many female authors who simply “let the language of the male culture speak for itself.”<sup>388</sup> After relating another possibly true, possibly false tale of how he was paid by the brother of a lover to abandon an affair, she asks if he refused. Jimmie answers: “No,

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<sup>381</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 46, 49, 79, 92.

<sup>382</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>383</sup> Bilger, *Laughing Feminism*, 120.

<sup>384</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>385</sup> *Ibid.*, 120, 130.

<sup>386</sup> *Ibid.*, 120–21.

<sup>387</sup> *Ibid.*, 119, 122.

<sup>388</sup> Walker, *A Very Serious Thing*, 69.

no; on the contrary, I settle for six hundred and fifty’.”<sup>389</sup> When she comments with mock admiration that many men would have taken both the money and the girl, Jimmie tells her he could not as he is a man of honour.<sup>390</sup> At the same time that Jimmie’s “honour” is exposed as hollow, marriage is reaffirmed as a market in which women remain objects of commercial exchange and exploitation. January’s decision not to participate in it or couple herself with a fool is confirmed as one of sound judgement. This critical view of marriage, common to many female comic writers, is not central to Spark’s narrative, but it is present. The caution and common sense this modern heroine displays in matters of marriage indicates that issues of marriage, choice, control and autonomy remained important to a twentieth-century woman’s experience of the world.

As implied above, discerning speechlessness can become revolutionary when enacted by the female comic heroine, as can maligned forms of female speech. Carping, gossiping and nagging and are a few of the many pejorative terms that have been deployed in order to characterise and control women’s speech.<sup>391</sup> Susan Purdie writes that “the ancient assumption that women ‘talk more than men’ – which is empirically false – reflects a radical prescription that women should not talk at all.”<sup>392</sup> This prescription is fleetingly reflected in Robinson’s remark to and on January that “Women [...] do come out with things”.<sup>393</sup> This remark situates January, and women in general, as the ‘inept speaker’ in relation to the ‘proper speaker’ of the joke.<sup>394</sup> Such discursive ineptness is often assigned to the butt of a joke, to the Other, usually a racial other.<sup>395</sup> In joking exchanges, women are normally “not ‘inept’

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<sup>389</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 172.

<sup>390</sup> Ibid.

<sup>391</sup> Purdie, *Comedy: The Master of Discourse*, 133.

<sup>392</sup> Ibid.

<sup>393</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 20.

<sup>394</sup> Purdie, *Comedy: The Master of Discourse*, 129–30.

<sup>395</sup> Ibid., 130–31.



speakers but, at a fundamental level, speechless”.<sup>396</sup> Due to their being cast as discursively ‘lower’ or lacking, women’s speech “typically demonstrates the apprehension that they have to work harder to gain attention by using redundant exaggeration, repetition and emphasis”.<sup>397</sup> This attention-seeking speaking style is used by January, with an ironic, attention-deflecting purpose, in her final exchange with her brother-in-law:

‘I should think,” said Ian Brodie, ‘you were in your element with three men dancing round you, and no other woman around.’  
 ‘It was delightful,’ I said.  
 ‘Nice chaps, were they?’  
 ‘Charming.’  
 ‘This Robinson seems a peculiar sort, living like that on an island. I don’t like the sound of *him*.’  
 ‘He was delightful,’ I said.  
 ‘Oh, was he?’  
 ‘Yes, charming.’  
 ‘There was a young boy. Supposed to be adopted.’  
 ‘Yes, charming.’  
 ‘It must have been awkward, all living together like that.’  
 ‘It was delightful,’ I said, ‘it was charming.’  
 ‘Well,’ he said, ‘it’s rather embarrassing for me, you know, when people ask what happened.’  
 ‘Don’t they read the papers?’  
 ‘There’s always a lot more behind these things – people want to know what really happened.’  
 ‘Oh, it was really, tell them, all delightful and charming.’<sup>398</sup>

Spark’s intermittent insertion of ‘I said’ in this passage ensures that her protagonist’s purposeful passive resistance is not misread. By the time the reader reaches these final pages of the novel, they are aware of the verbal prowess January is capable of and able therefore to perceive in her tight-lipped responses a sly form of protest. Alternating between the vacuous feminine descriptors of ‘lovely’ and ‘charming’, January intentionally casts herself as an inept speaker. She may even be said to embrace female speechlessness by refusing to speak in defence of her own virtue or

<sup>396</sup> Purdie, *Comedy: The Master of Discourse*, 130.

<sup>397</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>398</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 172.

to acknowledge her prying brother-in-law's underlying insinuations. She contrives not only to make herself the teller of the joke (the 'proper' speaker) but to make Brodie, in his blatant probing and sordid suggestions, the butt.

Behind this joking exchange lingers January's continuing resistance to the control Brodie wishes to exert over her sexual and romantic life. Her repetitious resistance reflects a strategy employed by many female writers who seek to protest and reject the "passive, nonintellectual [*sic*] stereotypes that deny women's independence and selfhoods".<sup>399</sup> Walker writes that female humourists have deliberately assumed an inept, non-intellectual *persona* in order to critique cultural assumptions regarding women's intellectual competence and reject the shallow, empty results of the rigid expectations and cultural conditioning imposed upon their sex.<sup>400</sup> Authors and characters may similarly employ a form of irony Walker terms "the double text", in which statements overtly adhere to assigned roles and beliefs but covertly reveal a deep discontent with the status quo and a defiant challenge to societal expectations.<sup>401</sup> By mimicking a decorous and artless feminine persona of which Brodie and his kind would presumably approve, January acts like an author by creating a character while also shielding the true authorial persona she is poised to claim. She has returned from her island adventure with a story to tell, a novel bubbling up from within. Her insistent non-disclosure here indicates that she has taken complete possession of her own narrative and will carefully choose the circumstances under which she allows it to emerge.

In this chapter, I have looked at how Spark blurs boundaries between genres, disobeys the conventions of these genres and introduces low, unofficial discourses

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<sup>399</sup> Walker, *A Very Serious Thing*, 97–98.

<sup>400</sup> Ibid.

<sup>401</sup> Ibid., 30–31, 34–36.

into a literary landscape in order to disrupt literary canon and tradition. Meditating on her heroine's place in a patriarchal library, Spark sheds light on her and her gender's relationship with literary histories and canons. Though *Robinson* may be seen in some ways to embrace female myth, in this chapter I have looked at how Spark ridicules literary myths of woman that have impeded female authorship, and with them, larger socio-cultural notions of femaleness. Inspired by theories of female orality, I have posited here that, rather than functioning within a religious moral framework, Spark's satire harks back to the pre-literary roots of the form, to a menacing and magical verbal virtuosity. Bringing this orality into her narrative voice, Spark's narrative disruptions in the form of proleptic, metaleptic, metafictional and metaphoric interjections, do not just break codes – they kill them, leaving her reader on continually shaky interpretive ground. Her conversational style and constant violations of sequencing rules reflect the non-teleological, gossipy style of female humour. Like many women writers before her, Spark uses comedy to question cycles of cultural reproduction and mock the lords of creation. Spark's heroine likewise uses repetition, speechlessness and inept speech acts as a discerning protest against figures of authority, notions of femininity and the problematic institution of marriage. These comic strategies, as with many of the strategies discussed in this chapter, suggest that challenges to socio-cultural beliefs and practices and disruptions of literary traditions are not an end in themselves. Rather, they create a rupture through which hope, possibility and change might begin to work. Such hope, possibility and change will be the focus of my next chapter.

### CHAPTER 3: ACTS OF FEMALE CREATION

More than simply disruptive, humour helps the heroine of *Robinson* to transform life into art, old texts into new traditions, struggle into self-knowledge and potential tragedy into triumphant comedy. Such transformation reflects the theory that the chief purpose of feminist comedy is change – individual and collective. In chapter four, my focus will be on cultural, collective change. In this chapter, I will consider the individual transformation of Spark's comic heroine and how humour protects and aids the creation of this new artist, her new artwork and the self-defined woman into which she evolves. I will begin by considering *Robinson* as a parodic revisioning of the Western, biblical myth of creation that creates space for the female author and creator. By disrupting a myth that has had such heavy literary implications for women, Spark finds a way to write herself into literary history and forever alter it for future readers. Bypassing complex theories of parody, I have once again turned to feminist theories by Walker, Gilbert and Gubar, Bilger and Adrienne Rich to explain how Spark refigures the Genesis myth, inserting autobiographical jokes into her work as a way of authoring herself. The first section of this chapter concentrates on Spark, but the remaining three sections will track the virtually inseparable journey of author and protagonist as both undertake a female quest for self-definition and self-authorship. The authorial tug-of-war between January and Robinson has been touched on by a handful of critics but Tom Wells arguably poses a greater threat to January's authorial ability. Examining both relationships, I will highlight how mockery, banter, puns, wordplay and Spark's magical brand of satire

enable her heroine to elude the limiting names, roles and fate allocated her. Simultaneously, Spark can be seen eluding traditional comic conventions and creating a category-defying style of which she alone is the creator and definitive purveyor. Prompted by Little, who links female comedy with quest, the final section of this chapter explores *Robinson* as a feminised quest narrative ending in the liberated transformation of the female subject. Criticism by Spacks and Rachel Blau DuPlessis will help illustrate why the critique, the antagonism, indeed, the violence of comedy may prove as productive for women as it is destructive. Read in light of these theories, January Marlow emerges as a twentieth-century feminist heroine whose humour does more than just disrupt – it creates. It is pivotal to the creation of her revisionist text and, perhaps more importantly, to the creation of the artist and woman she becomes.

## REVISIONIST CREATIONISM AND THE FEMALE AUTHOR

As well as a gendered colonial narrative, *Robinson* is, in part, a feminist upending of the Christian creationist myth. Widely known in Western culture, this myth has been reappropriated by numerous female and male writers throughout history.<sup>402</sup> As the *lingua franca* of English culture, the Bible holds an “unrivalled cultural currency” that “adds power” and “a special sting” to any satire.<sup>403</sup> Conversely, applying humour to sacred texts can both humanise their drama and undermine their mythic power.<sup>404</sup> Walker writes that when female writers have refashioned the Genesis myth to serve their satirical ends, they have committed “a subversive—even an illicit—act. To possess language is to possess the power to name [...] and thus to

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<sup>402</sup> Walker, *The Disobedient Writer*, 26–44.

<sup>403</sup> Michael F. Suarez, “Mock-biblical Satire from Medieval to Modern,” in Quintero, *Companion to Satire*, 525–26.

<sup>404</sup> Walker, *The Disobedient Writer*, 32.

define.”<sup>405</sup> While some male authors have used this myth to satirise and stereotype women as talkative, meddlesome, sinful creatures, many female authors in their retellings of the creationist myth give their modern Eves the ability to use, erase or reject language, with all its attendant power and authority.<sup>406</sup> In doing so, these authors protest Eve’s exclusion from God-like generativity and woman’s exclusion from the creation of literature.<sup>407</sup> They claim a space for the woman as creator, despite the fact that “she does not have the proper ancestry to be an author.”<sup>408</sup> The problem of a female writer’s placement – or displacement – in Bloom’s patriarchal poetic model was highlighted by Gilbert and Gubar when in 1979 they wrote that, in Western culture, the author has been conceived as “a father, a progenitor, a procreator, an aesthetic patriarch,” his pen as “an instrument of generative power like his penis” and literary history as a partly reverent, partly rebellious relationship between fathers and sons.<sup>409</sup> One way women writers have attempted to transcend the anxiety of authorship that resulted was “by *revising* male genres, using them to record their own dreams and their own stories *in disguise*.” (emphasis original).<sup>410</sup> For Gilbert and Gubar, this subversive revisionary process stems from the female writer’s battle for self-creation, a battle “not against her (male) precursor’s reading of the world but against his reading of *her*” (emphasis original).<sup>411</sup> Spark and her protagonist both exhibit this defiant re-visioning impulse. January rewrites Robinson’s narrative just as Spark rewrites the biggest and best-known story of all, both placing themselves at the centre of their works. Humour is pivotal to both revisionary texts, with parody, private jokes, wordplay, mockery, irony and pure wit

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<sup>405</sup> Walker, *The Disobedient Writer*, 26.

<sup>406</sup> *Ibid.*, 30–32.

<sup>407</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>408</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>409</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 6, 46–47.

<sup>410</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>411</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

expressing dissent, providing protection and ultimately assisting in the creation of a new artist, a new artwork and a self-defined new woman.

Parody is the most obvious comic device to lend itself to the revisionist writer since it offers an “ironic rupture with the past”.<sup>412</sup> According to Hutcheon, parody can restore memory and recover forgotten or distorted histories.<sup>413</sup> It offers the option of “opening the text up, rather than closing it down”, its intertextual nature working against notions of closure and single, centralised meaning.<sup>414</sup> Consequently, it has become “one of the major ways in which women and other ex-centrics both use and abuse, set up and then challenge male traditions in art.”<sup>415</sup> This kind of comic revisionism is especially present in Spark’s early novels. Profiling Spark as a life-long revisionist, Glavin writes that her novel-writing career began with her “revising all those inherited narratives [...] playing a sort of dodge-em with the master’s tale”.<sup>416</sup> Sparkian revision, to him, is not merely a literary trick but “an *improving* task of literally vital necessity” (emphasis original).<sup>417</sup> In literature and in life, he writes, “Spark converts for the sake of converting, she converts to stay not dead”.<sup>418</sup> Rich puts this necessity in feminist perspective when she writes that revisionism is, for women, “more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival”,<sup>419</sup> for

[u]ntil we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for women, is more than a search for identity: it is part of our refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society [...] We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us.<sup>420</sup>

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<sup>412</sup> Hutcheon, “Intertextuality, Parody, and the Discourses of History,” 125.

<sup>413</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>414</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>415</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>416</sup> Glavin, “Muriel Spark: Beginning Again,” 306.

<sup>417</sup> John Glavin, “Muriel Spark’s *Unknowing Fiction*,” in Barreca, *Last Laughs*, 223.

<sup>418</sup> Glavin, “Muriel Spark: Beginning Again,” 223.

<sup>419</sup> Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*, 35.

<sup>420</sup> Ibid.

Throughout her career, Spark embraced and critiqued multiple texts, genres and traditions with her liberal parody. As already noted, with *Robinson*, her playful revisionary impulse extends back to the roots of the English novel, mocking the epistolary conventions of early novels and particularly the Robinsonade. With this chapter, I will argue that Spark's parody extends even further back with a Genesis rewrite in which she daringly revises the (supposed) beginning of the world. According to Walker, disobedient rewritings like this grow from – and presumably also instigate – a disobedient reading.<sup>421</sup> For female writers, the interaction with and imaginative appropriation of literary texts is often performed “as a way of both reformulating the tradition and claiming their own spaces within it.”<sup>422</sup> Contemporary criticism tends to agree that the intertextual exchange between authors, readers and texts is essential to the formation of literary traditions.<sup>423</sup> If so, then in generating intertextually rich and disobediently inventive narratives, female writers are not only generating single novels but new readers, new traditions and a literary canon of the future in which their creative ability, voices and stories are acknowledged and represented.

Women writers have made a habit of inserting their own voices and stories into literature, thus signalling that their own experience is at odds with accepted narratives and revising “traditional concepts of who counts, who is worthy of a life story.”<sup>424</sup> By allowing autobiographical elements to enter into the venerated arena of literature, the woman writer re-writes herself, transforming the female self from an object in another's literature into the centralised subject of her own. Like many critics of Spark, Valerie Shaw acknowledges the autobiographical element of her fiction, but

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<sup>421</sup> Walker, *The Disobedient Writer*, 3.

<sup>422</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>423</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>424</sup> *Ibid.*, 10, 174.



refrains from attributing such elements too neatly to the author since they clearly deviate from fact.<sup>425</sup> In a rare analysis of this aspect of Spark's work, she notes that Spark "weaves autobiographical strands into her fiction", that even in minute details "[f]act and fiction come extremely close together".<sup>426</sup> She is not alone in remarking that there are clear affinities between Spark and her protagonists and an early "interest in the female character who is prepared to be an individual".<sup>427</sup> Never "one to put raw personality on show", Spark was nevertheless known to "play around with the idea that the boundaries between reality and fiction are unstable" and include self-referential "clues which may or may not be picked up by readers."<sup>428</sup> In Spark's early fiction, these personal elements are more transparent and intrusive. In the case of *Robinson*, the three month period in which the narrative takes place corresponds almost exactly to a period of hospitalisation.<sup>429</sup> January obviously resembles Spark in age, voice, occupation, faith, circumstance and outlook. The first-person narration compounds this impression. There is the previously mentioned moment in which Muriel the Marvel intrudes on her text as well as a titular allusion to her son, Robin. Bluebell was also the name of Spark's beloved feline friend, and the name she gave a beautiful dress owned by her grandmother.<sup>430</sup> Critics have therefore read the novel as a sort of "distorted fictional autobiography."<sup>431</sup> Shaw notes that Spark's insertion of sly clues and private jokes has caused irritation in some critics.<sup>432</sup> Writing on *Robinson*, Kemp sees in Spark's "insistent trios", "ponderous private jokes", and "barely transmuted bits of personal material [that] break jarringly through the fictive

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<sup>425</sup> Valerie Shaw, "Fun and Games with Life-Stories," in Bold, *Muriel Spark: An Odd Capacity for Vision*, 48–50, 57, 62–64.

<sup>426</sup> Ibid., 48, 50.

<sup>427</sup> Ibid., 49, 52.

<sup>428</sup> Ibid., 62–64.

<sup>429</sup> Stannard, *Muriel Spark: The Biography*, 189.

<sup>430</sup> Muriel Spark, *Curriculum Vitae* (London: Constable & Co., 1992), 87–89.

<sup>431</sup> Parrinder, "Muriel Spark and Her Critics," 27.

<sup>432</sup> Shaw, "Fun and Games with Life-Stories," 63.

covering” an unsatisfactory experiment subsequently abandoned by the author or evidence of “content not fully subdued into an imaginative pattern.”<sup>433</sup> This kind of “[s]elf-conscious doodling” makes him wonder if there is some “private code” at work that he cannot discern.<sup>434</sup> Shaw denies the use of a private code,<sup>435</sup> though not for the following reason; for the private joke is a particular feature of female humour, one that can permit expression despite oppression, one that hints at a defiant act of self-authorship.

Private jokes are a joy women have long enjoyed, not just due to the restrictions and judgements placed on their humour, but because it has been a way for them to express, either in writing or speech, their secret understanding of the incongruity between public and private images, myths of woman and the reality.<sup>436</sup> Both female culture and female humour are understood to be deeply encoded but, where the codes of the dominant culture are announced and articulated, the codes of female culture are whispered, buried, made invisible and necessarily subversive.<sup>437</sup> Indeed, the history of women’s humour suggests that the less accepted it is by the dominant culture, the more designed to evade discovery and censure it becomes.<sup>438</sup> During times of active feminist struggle, there has been a marked change in strategy with female humourists of all varieties becoming more argumentative and outspoken.<sup>439</sup> Yet, women’s use of humour has also been complicated by their close involvement with, even dependence on, members of the dominant group.<sup>440</sup> It is this same relationship that has impeded women’s access to the autobiographical form. Walker explains that “women have typically taken a route to self-definition that is

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<sup>433</sup> Kemp, *Muriel Spark*, 37.

<sup>434</sup> Ibid.

<sup>435</sup> Shaw, “Fun and Games with Life-Stories,” 63.

<sup>436</sup> Bilger, *Laughing Feminism*, 61.

<sup>437</sup> Walker, *A Very Serious Thing*, 105.

<sup>438</sup> Caliskan, “Is There Such a Thing as Women’s Humor?,” 54–55.

<sup>439</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>440</sup> Walker, *A Very Serious Thing*, 103–4.

relational rather than isolated—referential to one or more ‘others’ or to a defining cultural narrative.”<sup>441</sup> As such, Walker concludes that female autobiography has much in common with spiritual conversion narratives.<sup>442</sup> This is interesting to note since the emphasis placed by mainstream criticism on Spark’s religious conversion has resulted in her fictions frequently being read as reverent conversion narratives.<sup>443</sup> But taking into account the autobiographical elements of the text, it might equally be understood as an act of deliberate self-creation in which the female writer writes herself into existence, inserts herself into an historical narrative from which she has continually been erased.<sup>444</sup> In writing a version of herself into a long established text, Spark may be said to be writing herself into literature as well as history, to be carving out a space for herself in literary history that irredeemably transfigures whatever she touches in that sanctified sphere. For, since revision is thought to forever alter the parent-text,<sup>445</sup> none of the works parodied in *Robinson* may ever be read quite so obediently again.

## THE COMIC HEROINE’S BATTLE FOR AUTHORSHIP

In *Robinson*, Spark’s heroine must defeat two potential male authors in her quest for self-authorship and self-creation – her island host, Robinson, and fellow survivor, Tom Wells. Robinson is already an author, having penned his tract on *The Dangers of Marian Doctrine* before withdrawing from the world. Notably, this work is a compilation of letters and articles, rather than a sustained, complex treatise.<sup>446</sup> It is also something he continues to perfect, rather than finding a fresh intellectual and

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<sup>441</sup> Walker, *The Disobedient Writer*, 122.

<sup>442</sup> Ibid.

<sup>443</sup> Cheyette, “Writing Against Conversion,” 97.

<sup>444</sup> Walker, *The Disobedient Writer*, 10, 124.

<sup>445</sup> Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, “Hystorical Fictions: Women (Re)Writing and (Re)Reading History,” *Women: A Cultural Review* 15, no. 2 (July 2004): 148, Taylor & Francis Online.

<sup>446</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 77.

creative challenge.<sup>447</sup> For Cheyette, Robinson is merely “a false author”, a typical Sparkian “authority figure who wishes to determine the actions of all those under his sway”.<sup>448</sup> Książopolska writes that in gifting January her notebook and establishing her parameters, he is preparing her to be “the scribe of his adventure”.<sup>449</sup> But January deviates from this male-inscribed narrative, as all comic heroines inevitably do. Książopolska believes that it is this battle for authorship that prompts Robinson to stage his death in what she views as a travesty of Barthes’ dead author.<sup>450</sup> This central tug-of-war for authorial control between January and Robinson begins building with her first journal entry, in which she starts documenting the size, history, shape and topography of the island. She finishes with: “I have these facts from Robinson. He has given me this notebook. He said, ‘Keep to facts, that will be the healthiest course’”.<sup>451</sup> In her subsequent recollection, she notes: “I recall that it was Robinson’s idea to write very small, to make no paragraphs, to save paper” and, again: “I recall that Robinson advised more than once, ‘Stick to facts’”.<sup>452</sup> The insidious imposition of male authority on female narratives is a favourite theme of Spark’s, pivotal to *The Comforters* (1957), *The Driver’s Seat* (1970), *The Hothouse on the East River* (1973) and *Loitering With Intent* (1981), amongst others. Like her other writerly female protagonists, January initially adheres to Robinson’s rules on what and how to write, omitting thoughts or suspicions she does not know to be fact.<sup>453</sup> But she soon tires of his advice,<sup>454</sup> agonising silently over how to best defy him whilst outwardly playing word games with her overbearing host.<sup>455</sup>

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<sup>447</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 78.

<sup>448</sup> Cheyette, *Muriel Spark*, 31.

<sup>449</sup> Książopolska, “The Missing Body,” 9.

<sup>450</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>451</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 17.

<sup>452</sup> *Ibid.*, 17–18.

<sup>453</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>454</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>455</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

Later in the novel, January sits at Robinson's desk, steals pages from his drawer and fills them with luxurious paragraphs of observations, suppositions and intuitions.<sup>456</sup> These pages, having breached the boundaries of the slim notebook Robinson allocated her, are tucked into the cover to be reprinted as part of her rebellious retelling. Robinson's oft-repeated directive of "Stick to facts" is also mutilated and mocked by January. After researching and recounting his backstory, she muses

I sat limply in the cane chair, exhausted by this assembling of facts. I had enjoyed the small catty task – since by his 'stick to facts' Robinson had not meant facts about himself.<sup>457</sup>

These laughably disobedient writing acts reflect Barreca's belief that female humour offers a way for women to "channel anger and rebellion", to harness rather than release such energies.<sup>458</sup> Women thus turn mockery into a creative enterprise – they "take their oppression and, through humor, turn it around and create."<sup>459</sup> Named after her birthdate, January is "first". She is the first woman, the Eve – or more probably, the Lilith – of the world Robinson believes he has created in his own image. Though her authorial ability is initially unarticulated, ultimately her creative potential challenges the self-appointed deity and supposed writer of this reality. Her humour enhanced rebellion drives him from his library, his writing desk, evicting him from his own private Eden. However staged, the death of this false, male author allows the real author to emerge, the female author to rebirth herself in the internal tunnels of the island.<sup>460</sup>

Before January can enact her creative rebirth and write her story, another male author must be confronted and defeated. Following Robinson's abdication, her

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<sup>456</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 120–22.

<sup>457</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>458</sup> Barreca, "'A Difference of Taste in Jokes'," 302.

<sup>459</sup> Linda Naranjo-Huebl, "From Peek-a-Boo to Sarcasm: Women's Humor as a Means of Both Connection and Resistance," *Studies in Prolife Feminism* 1, no. 4 (Fall 1995): para. 88, Academic OneFile.

<sup>460</sup> Little, *Comedy and the Woman Writer*, 112.

and her work fall under the far more nefarious threat of Tom Wells, blackmailer and would-be lady-killer. Driven underground by Wells who seeks to destroy both her and her manuscript, the rebellious female text becomes, in the novel's climax, both a dangerous weapon which threatens to expose immoral deeds and characters, and an endangered artefact requiring the protection of an intrepid heroine. Here, the island's subterranean tunnels and caves become symbolically significant as a "place of female power, [...] one of the great antechambers of the mysteries of transformation."<sup>461</sup> Taking their cue from Freud, Gilbert and Gubar describe the cave as "a womb-like enclosure, a house of earth, secret and often sacred" with as much negative metaphoric potential for the female writer as positive mythic possibility.<sup>462</sup> January is initially barred from this place of female power and mythic transformation. Though the caves of Robinson appear on the map at the beginning of the novel, they are at first shrouded in secrecy. When she exhibits curiosity about these sites, known only to Robinson and his young disciple, Miguel refuses to divulge his secret knowledge.<sup>463</sup> Secrecy, like satire and gossip, can be "a means of aggression."<sup>464</sup> Secrets also "articulate a boundary: an interior not visible to outsiders, the demarcation of a separate domain, a sphere of autonomous power."<sup>465</sup> To Robinson, the caves are merely "slimy holes in the mountain"<sup>466</sup> but, along with the moon-like, moon-drenched landscape and wellsprings bubbling out from between fat cacti lips, they hint at a female aspect to this largely masculine terrain.<sup>467</sup> Little emphasises this telling comic inversion, writing that it is typically a male hero that "descends into a geographic context reminiscent of a woman's body" and "conquers a female threat in

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<sup>461</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 95.

<sup>462</sup> Ibid., 93–95.

<sup>463</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 37, 65.

<sup>464</sup> Rabb, "The Secret Life of Satire," 573.

<sup>465</sup> Evelyn Fox Keller, "Making Gender Visible in the Pursuit of Nature's Secrets," in De Lauretis, *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, 69.

<sup>466</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 73.

<sup>467</sup> Ibid., 63–64.

the far reaches of his descent (or travel, or dream)".<sup>468</sup> Spark refigures this convention with a female hero who "descends into an island shaped like a human being, supposedly a male human being, but one also with female associations", where she conquers a Hades-like figure in Wells.<sup>469</sup>

This transformational descent, with its connotations of a mythic underworld and/or Christ-like resurrection, is activated by Robinson's absence, the search for whom is presented in mock-biblical language. "On the eleventh day we rested," January recalls, trespassing beyond the seventh day of God's creational timeline, and "On the twelfth day we set out for the subterranean caves."<sup>470</sup> These caves resemble hell as vividly as other parts of the island resemble Eden.<sup>471</sup> The sensationalistic red glow, claustrophobic darkness, fiendish silhouettes and smoky air all add to the unholy atmosphere and sense of suspense.<sup>472</sup> Deliberately confounding her biblical revision and mythical inversion, Spark's novel here swerves from the genre of island adventure to detective fiction, but detective fiction with a determined feminist agenda. For the discovery of an unknown space or secret chamber is also a stock feature of detective fiction.<sup>473</sup> The literal discovery of such a site in female reappropriations of this typically male genre indicates "the figurative acquisition of emotional, psychological, imaginative, and rhetorical ground."<sup>474</sup> Humour, according to Biamonte, often plays a pivotal role in this acquisition. The pursuit of a criminal in female detective stories frequently becomes a pursuit of self in which a female amateur detective uses humour "to protect and to create her

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<sup>468</sup> Little, *Comedy and the Woman Writer*, 112.

<sup>469</sup> Ibid.

<sup>470</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 110.

<sup>471</sup> Bold, *Muriel Spark*, 41.

<sup>472</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 111.

<sup>473</sup> Biamonte, "Funny, Isn't It?," 242.

<sup>474</sup> Ibid.

evolving self.”<sup>475</sup> Humour “becomes her expanding cocoon, enabling her to create a larger space within which to survive as a woman.”<sup>476</sup> In a genre that “attempts to render several fluctuating borders”, humour that tests boundaries also creates them, while laughter, “evoked by blatant attack or subtle ridicule, threatens to become an act of creation”.<sup>477</sup> For Spark, fresh literary space is discovered by mixing biblical imagery and language with mythical figures and symbols and pulpy pop culture conventions – and by taking none too seriously. By collapsing the boundaries between high and low, old and new, the sacred and depraved, she is in this second novel in the process of inventing for herself a baffling but idiosyncratic new genre.

For her fictional writer, the violent physical encounter with Wells in the secret chamber of female transformation is more of a comma than a full-stop, more of an evasion than a definitive victory. Upon their return, Wells makes a final attempt to destroy January’s version of events with a magazine interview that rewrites their island adventure as a Crusoesque tale of chivalry, comradeship and courage.<sup>478</sup> It is this return to the traditional tale and the unconscionable reading of her that is more important for her to conquer. In his interview, Wells comments, with more than a touch of patriarchal condescension, that their ordeal “was strain on Jan’s nerves, but she was a brick”.<sup>479</sup> Twisting his words, she retorts in thought, “Would that I were [...] I would hurl myself at his fat head”.<sup>480</sup> This is the kind of grim humour and verbal jostling that has helped remake the hardboiled detective genre into a vehicle of self-definition for women writers, one which undermines authorised readings of an event and satisfies the female desire to tell her side of the story.<sup>481</sup> Self-definition and the

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<sup>475</sup> Biamonte, “Funny, Isn’t It?,” 240.

<sup>476</sup> Ibid.

<sup>477</sup> Ibid., 236–37.

<sup>478</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 169–70.

<sup>479</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>480</sup> Ibid.

<sup>481</sup> Biamonte, “Funny, Isn’t It?,” 236, 241–42.



celebration of female story also lie at the core of understandings of feminist humour.<sup>482</sup> In *Robinson*, Spark uses comedy and January uses humour, not only to resist imposed narratives but to create new ones. Just as comedy can create space for the invention and definition of new forms, humour can create protective boundaries around a personality in the process of transformation and rebirth.

## **HUMOUR AS RESISTANCE: ESCAPING NAMES, ROLES AND CATEGORIES**

Names are a profoundly meaningful element of language, bestowing singularity, identity and definition. Names are also given great significance in Spark's narratives. The names of her characters often contain a clue, or multiple clues, to a significant aspect of their nature or purpose. The titles of her books all contain some sort of joke or wordplay. The title of *Robinson* is itself polysemic, referring to two famous novels and a genre, to two new novels (Spark's and January's) and to the character and place they focus on. According to Kemp, it contains an autobiographical allusion to Spark's son, Robin.<sup>483</sup> Similarly, many surmise that the character of January Marlow is named firstly after the two-faced God Janus, who fuses opposites and sees both the past and future, beginning and end.<sup>484</sup> Simultaneously omniscient and fragmented, Janus is associated with duality, time, birth, transitions and passage, all of which is reflected in January's journey. Her last name is generally considered to be an allusion to Joseph Conrad's Charles Marlow, the definitive unreliable narrator.<sup>485</sup> The names of each of the four main characters also seem to refer to places.<sup>486</sup> In this respect, Cheyette, writes, they each "represent

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<sup>482</sup> Crawford, "On Conversational Humor," 25.

<sup>483</sup> Kemp, *Muriel Spark*, 37.

<sup>484</sup> Ohmann, "Muriel Spark's *Robinson*," 71.

<sup>485</sup> Ibid.

<sup>486</sup> Cheyette, *Muriel Spark*, 30.

a confusion between subject and object”.<sup>487</sup> Adam Sumera thinks differently, writing that the “reason for this choice of names is not clear. As a joke, it is rather cheap.”<sup>488</sup> These autobiographical elements, the “out-of-place” word choices and abstract humour are all, he finds, “difficult to fit into the pattern of a more complex reading of the book.”<sup>489</sup> Other critics have explained Spark’s loaded naming techniques in different ways. For David Herman, Spark “highlights the arbitrariness of singling out any one system of categories as best suited for capturing the facts of the matter” with her exploration of “the multiplicity of ways in which situations, objects, and events can be ordered through categories or descriptive nomenclatures”.<sup>490</sup> This explanation certainly fits with the disruptive impulse explored in the previous chapter. More pertinent to this chapter, however, is Marilyn Reizbaum’s suggestion that “associative naming, or character formation, in accordance with Spark’s ideas about writing, is like a killing or limiting of character”.<sup>491</sup> These labels mock the assumptive act of naming more than they mock any character in her novels.<sup>492</sup> Similarly, for Patricia Stubbs, the process of labelling or definition should create unification or synthesis but, in Spark’s works, “the effect is instead divisive, corrupt, tending to destroy”.<sup>493</sup>

Spark herself linked naming with poetry and magic. For her, being a poet meant “looking at life as verbal art. ‘Naming a thing. Naming it precisely.’”<sup>494</sup> Names, in her words, “have a magic”.<sup>495</sup> Extending the notion, advanced in the previous

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<sup>487</sup> Cheyette, *Muriel Spark*, 30.

<sup>488</sup> Adam Sumera, “Muriel Spark’s Two Earliest Novels,” *Folia Litteraria* 36 (1994): 159, <http://dSPACE.uni.lodz.pl/xmlui/handle/11089/14161>.

<sup>489</sup> *Ibid.*, 159–60.

<sup>490</sup> David Herman, introduction to *Muriel Spark: Twenty-First-Century Perspectives*, ed. David Herman, 4.

<sup>491</sup> Marilyn Reizbaum, “The Stranger Spark,” in Gardiner and Maley, *The Edinburgh Companion to Muriel Spark*, 50.

<sup>492</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>493</sup> Patricia Stubbs, *Muriel Spark* (Harlow, Essex: Longman Group in association with the British Council, 1973), 28.

<sup>494</sup> Stannard, *Muriel Spark: The Biography*, 491.

<sup>495</sup> Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, 11.

chapter, that Sparkian satire bears some resemblance to the ancient, ritual roots of the form, I understand the emphasis on naming in *Robinson*, and Spark's narratives generally, as part of this virtuosic oral tradition. All language, according to Barreca, possesses a magical, creational power.<sup>496</sup> In playing with it, women return it to the "boundary of the imaginary and the symbolic", a boundary where it "appears as magical thinking, as creation itself".<sup>497</sup> This creational power becomes particularly significant, when dealing with names. For, if language is magic, then whoever holds the naming rights of an individual, also holds the power to determine their identity and destiny.

January's first interaction with Robinson establishes her host's controlling nature but also indicates that naming language will somehow be significant to the narrative that follows. Disoriented due to a concussion, January asks,

'Where am I?'  
 'Robinson,' he said.  
 'Where?'  
 'Robinson.'  
 He was short and square, with a brown face and greyish curly hair.  
 'Robinson,' he repeated. 'In the North Atlantic Ocean. How do you feel?'  
 'Who are you?'  
 'Robinson,' he said. 'How do you feel?'  
 'Who?'  
 'Robinson.'<sup>498</sup>

Punctuated by a comic mix-up involving the rhyming nouns of cat and rat, Robinson orders January to describe not indicate her injuries and to think but not too hard, before mistaking her name for the month and place of her birth.<sup>499</sup> This instant assumption of power over her body, brain and identity gives January something ignorant and inflexible against which to better understand, define and reinforce her

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<sup>496</sup> Regina Barreca, introduction to *Last Laughs*, ed. Regina Barreca, 17.

<sup>497</sup> Ibid.

<sup>498</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 10.

<sup>499</sup> Ibid., 11–12.

identity. Shortly afterwards, she recalls Robinson introducing her to her fellow survivors, “naming me ‘Miss January’”.<sup>500</sup> In this passage, names and words seem unfamiliar to her, as she re-learns the word for ‘eat’.<sup>501</sup> Having fully regained her wits, she intrudes on an apparently exclusive male conversation between Robinson and Jimmie, which Robinson halts by announcing conspicuously: “‘Miss January is here.’” January responds with: “‘My name is not *Miss* January. I am Mrs Marlow.’”<sup>502</sup> This pivotal point early in the narrative shows January beginning to clarify her identity in response to Robinson’s attempts to cast her as the first entry in a cheesecake calendar, Jimmie’s attempts to make of her a marriageable damsel in distress and Wells’ constant attempts to brand her “Jan”, “Janey”, “sweetie”, “honey”, lovey”, “dear” or worse.<sup>503</sup> These patronising and controlling speech acts, discussed in chapter 1, enable Spark to ‘other’ men, to caricature and satirise their foibles.<sup>504</sup> But they also illustrate Rich’s point that “the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative”.<sup>505</sup> Walker agrees, tracing this male prerogative back to the opening verses of the Bible in which Adam names Eve, along with all the beasts of God’s newly created world.<sup>506</sup> “Thus,” she deduces, “the act of naming is inextricably tied to the act of creation itself.”<sup>507</sup> In Robinson’s Eden, January resists the creation of her identity by others and insists on the creation of her identity as her sole right. The puns and wordplay involving names form a significant aspect of Spark’s satirical revision of creationism and a significant aspect of the feminist implications of this novel.

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<sup>500</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 14.

<sup>501</sup> *Ibid.*, 14–15.

<sup>502</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>503</sup> *Ibid.*, 8, 51, 62, 96, 138–40, 170.

<sup>504</sup> Little, *Comedy and the Woman Writer*, 111–12.

<sup>505</sup> Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*, 35.

<sup>506</sup> Walker, *The Disobedient Writer*, 26.

<sup>507</sup> *Ibid.*

January's resistance to being written upon and her insistence on writing herself are also illustrated by her rejection of typical female roles. In permitting her heroine such latitude, Spark likewise resists the stabilising happy endings that comedy has traditionally promised. January is, as Spark was at this time, a single woman with a grown child, a strong Catholic faith and an even stronger artistic vocation. Marriage, motherhood and conversion all lie behind her. During her time on the island, she is given the opportunity to change her solitary state with a choice of three potential mates and a second chance at motherhood. But neither marriage nor motherhood appeal to January. She disdains any suggestion of a union between her and any one of her male companions.<sup>508</sup> And she seems to view Miguel with a combination of sibling rivalry and concerned but detached curiosity; one moment she will advocate on his behalf, the next she is squabbling with him over ownership of her birthdate.<sup>509</sup> Just as she refused to play nursemaid to Wells in the opening pages of the novel, January never adopts the role of loving, nurturing mother to the motherless little boy in her midst. Spark's female heroes, Little states,

do not fall into the stereotypical patterns of 'feminine' passivity, or of all-nourishing and sympathetic mother to males or children. The female hero is intellectually and physically qualified for the arduous self-confrontation, and for assertion in relation to others, that a spiritual quest requires.<sup>510</sup>

Indeed, family and community, even female community, are typically regarded with cynicism by Spark.<sup>511</sup> In *Robinson*, contrary to the conventions of the Robinsonade, there is "very little comradeship displayed."<sup>512</sup> The "uneasy and even hostile"

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<sup>508</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 29, 64, 97, 119, 139, 172.

<sup>509</sup> *Ibid.*, 53, 58.

<sup>510</sup> Little, *Comedy and the Woman Writer*, 106.

<sup>511</sup> Nixon, "[A] Virginal Tongue Hold'," 303–4.

<sup>512</sup> Kemp, *Muriel Spark*, 31.

survivors “are received with only reluctant hospitality” by their island host, forming “at best a nervy and precarious community.”<sup>513</sup>

Furthermore, even as January’s sisters appear as mental touchstones to her female past, these relationships also seem fraught with tension. After her elopement and pregnancy at a young age, January recalls her estrangement from her sisters, particularly from Agnes,

because she was the eldest; lumpy, unmarried, and resenting my adventure. [...] We became friends, up to the point where it is possible to be friends with Agnes, who eats noisily for one thing.<sup>514</sup>

Julia she thinks of as “a loose girl”, so she is not invited when this sister weds.<sup>515</sup> When January comments on this to Agnes, Agnes tells her to shut up – twice. Certainly the humour of these remembrances softens the sister-on-sister judgement, but it also increases January’s isolation. Though female, Agnes and Julia cannot offer any sense of a literary or artistic female lineage. They belong to the world of marriage, family and a more conventional form of feminine expression. They inhabit a different world, just as January thinks of Jimmie and Wells as inhabiting different worlds.<sup>516</sup> January, however, chooses isolation over community, singularity over conventionality and self over Other, leaving the island not with a newly adopted son in Miguel but with the perfect companion for a solitary writer. Bluebell the Cat is the only other surviving female on the island and the only relationship that continues beyond its confines. January encounters her at the same time that she encounters her host and works hard to win her over from Robinson.<sup>517</sup> In gifting her the cat in the final pages of the novel,<sup>518</sup> Robinson cedes his influence over the feminine and

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<sup>513</sup> Kemp, *Muriel Spark*, 31.

<sup>514</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 16.

<sup>515</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>516</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>517</sup> *Ibid.*, 11, 42–43.

<sup>518</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

leaves January free to pursue an existence that is distinctly feline in spirit – independent, whimsical, capricious and pleasure-seeking.

This kind of conclusion is perhaps what Judith Wilt refers to when she writes of female comic writers withholding comedy's traditional promises of fertility, humility and community.<sup>519</sup> Yet however expertly they wield their wits, Wilt laments that, as a weapon, comedy "keeps turning against women [...] even in our own hands."<sup>520</sup> She outlines only two options for the laughing literary heroine, that of matriarch or maiden. The voice of the matriarchal comic is

knowing, sly, packed full of ripe experience, aware of the price being paid by all, capable of giving shocks. And yet she has certainly accepted the saga itself as is; she is proud of her survival, committed to small revelations and large reconciliations. She speaks, with her considerable intelligence, from within the myth [...] The matriarchal comic has given herself to love, marriage, family, community, a hostage to the fortunes of that myth; her job is not change, but recognition of patterns and reconciliation of wandering strands.<sup>521</sup>

If a young woman dares become one of these wandering strands, she may find herself at the mercy of a corrective matriarchal comedy "suddenly allied with patriarchal tyranny".<sup>522</sup> What ultimately stunts the joyous humour of the maiden comic, however, is not matriarchal censure but abruptly encountering the "smothering wall of husband".<sup>523</sup> The target of maiden comedy is always marriage, often romantic love, but this kind of laughter "becomes lethal [...] if women exercise it beyond the first 'yes' to the husband".<sup>524</sup> Wilt adds that comedy generally depicts the unmarried heroine as a

virgin-mocker, the girl-hunter of folly with the feasting smile—Artemis, Diana. She expresses rather than represses; she piles no sandbags on

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<sup>519</sup> Judith Wilt, "The Laughter of Maidens, the Cackle of Matriarchs: Notes on the Collision between Comedy and Feminism," in *Gender and the Literary Voice*, ed. Janet Todd (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1980), 180.

<sup>520</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>521</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>522</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>523</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>524</sup> *Ibid.*, 187, 189.

the dike of the collapsing world; she exposes and deflates, in fundamental comic style, finding no role *in* the world which totally satisfies her [...] But her time is short: as comic narrative creates, celebrates, the[n] deflates *her*, she faces with *her* arrows of ridicule the arrow that always brings her down—Cupid's or Pluto's.<sup>525</sup>

According to this model, the maiden comic surrenders her wit and freedom as inevitably as the matriarchal comic accepts the conditions placed upon hers.<sup>526</sup> Wilt's theory certainly maps neatly onto many texts, written by both women and men. And, without doubt, the matriarchal comic voice was widely employed by numerous domestic novelists during the post-war period in which Spark took up novel-writing. But Spark only ever used elements of the domestic novel or the conventions of romance in order to mock them, so her comic heroines fall readily into the category of neither maiden nor matriarch. January's humour, as with most of Spark's protagonists, exhibits a little of the matriarchal and a little of the maiden style of wit. Strictly speaking, though, she is neither, and so she avoids their fate, retaining not just her humour but her freedom in a way that many literary maidens and matriarchs have been unable to do.

Unlike in literature, in reality, restrictions on female humour do not tend to lead to the inhibition or cessation of such humour but rather to more innovative modes of encoded expression. Indeed, women have a long history of masking aggressive intentions, of outwitting opposition, of wielding power indirectly, of living, in short, a double life.<sup>527</sup> Performing the role of woman requires "much indirect, circuitous behaviour and a great deal of repression and duplicity", yielding consequently a heightened potential for ironic expression.<sup>528</sup> Characterised by "indirection and subtlety", irony inhabits the realm of ambiguity and interpretation, paradox and

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<sup>525</sup> Wilt, "The Laughter of Maidens, the Cackle of Matriarchs," 179–80.

<sup>526</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>527</sup> Bilger, *Laughing Feminism*, 60.

<sup>528</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.



polyphony as opposed to the “the powerful, bold attack” of satire.<sup>529</sup> Where satire is “concerned with the generic”, irony “belongs to the individual”.<sup>530</sup> It “typically likes to conceal itself, unlike the self-assured and belligerent ego of satire.”<sup>531</sup> Irony may, therefore, be a more comfortable fit for many female humourists. Bilger asserts that the necessary doubleness of women’s existence creates the perfect conditions for the production of humour, with female maturation resulting in the comprehension and production of multiple levels of irony.<sup>532</sup> A healthy sense of humour in women may therefore be the result of, not just survival, but growth, maturation, movement. Rather than keeping them stuck and stunted in the static categories of maiden or matriarch, angel or monster, sinner or saint, humour allows the modern heroine to move within these categories, or indeed, move out of them, step beyond their boundaries. As Barreca remarks, “sense of humor is now standard issue for the modern heroine, replacing even beauty as the essential ingredient for some writers”.<sup>533</sup> This is perhaps because it offers the opportunity for these female representations to ripen, strengthen, improve and evolve.

## **FEMALE QUEST AND FEMINIST COMEDY: THE PURSUIT OF CHANGE**

Taking time out from her male company with a walk, January comments: “My moods are not stable at the best of times.”<sup>534</sup> Before another walk, Robinson urges her to wear a waterproof raincoat as “The weather is a woman on this island.”<sup>535</sup> The supposedly changeable nature of women has long been a preoccupation of the beset, bemused male writer. “In life and in literature, men keep imagining women,”

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<sup>529</sup> Pavlovskis-Petit, “Irony and Satire,” 510–12.

<sup>530</sup> *Ibid.*, 511.

<sup>531</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>532</sup> Bilger, *Laughing Feminism*, 59.

<sup>533</sup> Barreca, *They Used to Call Me Snow White*, 11.

<sup>534</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 49.

<sup>535</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

Spacks observes, “as though women could be monolithically defined.”<sup>536</sup> The claim made by so many men that they cannot understand women solidifies the common belief of an absolute difference between the sexes and prevents any awareness of the inherent humanity women and men share.<sup>537</sup> Writing on the eighteenth century, Spacks explains that the threat felt by men when attempting to comprehend the nature of the female Other resulted in the view that, whether sinner or saint, naughty or nice, women were essentially changeless beings defined by static structures of feeling.<sup>538</sup> This view informed a tradition of female characters who do not alter with or reflect upon life experiences, whose actions are responsive rather than initiatory, who are helpless to effect change and are denied by their authors the capacity for self-knowledge.<sup>539</sup> This denial of women’s capacity for internal complexity, social intervention, human response and personal growth, not only reinforced the eighteenth-century myth of passive womanhood but flattered male egos with female characters consistent in their compliance.<sup>540</sup> Far from exhibiting anything like compliance, January recalls her reaction to her host’s comment on the island’s woman-like weather thus: “I already had one arm in the garment when I peeled it off and threw it on the ground as if it were teeming with maggots.”<sup>541</sup> Protesting that the coat is salvaged material from the crash, January elicits a chuckle from the reader and compels Robinson to give up his own raincoat instead.<sup>542</sup>

Not only changeable in her moods, January alters over the course of her journey, proving she possesses the facility to reflect, learn and transform. She is,

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<sup>536</sup> Patricia Meyer Spacks, “Female Changelessness: Or, What Do Women Want?,” *Studies in the Novel* 19, no. 3 (1987): 273, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/29532507>.

<sup>537</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.

<sup>538</sup> *Ibid.*, 273.

<sup>539</sup> *Ibid.*, 278–81.

<sup>540</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.

<sup>541</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 31.

<sup>542</sup> *Ibid.*

according to Little, “still in the liminal state of initiation into her new identity”.<sup>543</sup> The most creative phase of ritual, liminality is also, in Little’s estimation, the most ambiguous and anarchic.<sup>544</sup> Her theory of feminist comedy revolves around the idea of a feminised quest narrative in which a female outsider figure ventures into a liminal landscape of chaos, inversion and transformation.<sup>545</sup> Backed by the work of Simone de Beauvoir, Little notes that in quest narratives,

the man is typically the hero, the subject, the representative of humanity, the winner and conqueror, while woman is the mother, background, landscape, temptress, or goal. She is so much an outsider that she is not human. She is ‘other’; she is ‘natural’ or childlike or holy or evil, while the man is ‘man’ (humanity).<sup>546</sup>

Society does not encourage the metaphysical quest equally in men and women due to a belief that women’s lives contain “no life-adventure considered worthy of being used as a symbol for divine adventure”.<sup>547</sup> Spark’s comedy, she writes, is generally focalised around an anti-structure figure, an outsider who invades tradition, overturns institutions and leaves reality lurching.<sup>548</sup> The outsider figures of Spark’s early works are, like January, usually female and usually Catholic converts – “convert-searchers”, she dubs them.<sup>549</sup> Nevertheless, for her, Sparkian comedy does not revolve around her Catholic sensibility. Her “novels are not really about conversion, or about Catholicism,” she writes, “[t]hey concern instead the alarming and creative questions that occur to a sensitive and, it seems, rather mischievous heart and intellect in transit to self-knowledge.”<sup>550</sup>

For the heroine engaged in this divine adventure of self-knowledge, comic acts may prove a necessary violence. Gilbert and Gubar state that “the creative ‘I

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<sup>543</sup> Little, *Comedy and the Woman Writer*, 111.

<sup>544</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>545</sup> *Ibid.*, 1–2.

<sup>546</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>547</sup> *Ibid.*, 14, 18.

<sup>548</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>549</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>550</sup> *Ibid.*, 106–7.

AM' cannot be uttered if the 'I' knows not what it is."<sup>551</sup> Yet, many women writers have found that "the essential process of self-definition is complicated by all those patriarchal definitions that intervene between herself and herself."<sup>552</sup> Fired by a kind of "creative antagonism", the questing heroine is "roused by the fact that the book of stories and explanations excludes her."<sup>553</sup> Hence, in female quest narratives, Rachel Blau DuPlessis finds that frequently "the hero is a woman", "the quest is a critique of old myths" and the treasure at the end is "self-definition won only through the act of criticism".<sup>554</sup> By the end of this journey,

a new woman has been invented, one appropriating her own fruitfulness and power. She is both hero and treasure, a unity not achieved by heterosexual bonding but by anticolonial quest.<sup>555</sup>

In the case of Spark's new woman, the danger faced during her quest into the liminal landscape of Robinson is as much metaphysical as it is physical. Stannard states that

the sense of threat which permeates the novel is not simply the threat of rape or murder, of physical intimidation. More subtly it is the threat of appropriation by those compromising the freedom to reinvent oneself.<sup>556</sup>

This impediment to self – self-knowledge, self-definition, self-transformation and beyond that to artistic self-articulation – is perhaps why Stannard finds in Spark's work a macabre link between violence and sex, between injuring others and the definition of self.<sup>557</sup>

Humour has frequently "found a central place in a fiction marked by death, violence, and unimaginable atrocities."<sup>558</sup> In satire particularly, a dialectical

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<sup>551</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 17.

<sup>552</sup> Ibid.

<sup>553</sup> DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending*, 133.

<sup>554</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>555</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>556</sup> Stannard, *Muriel Spark: The Biography*, 189.

<sup>557</sup> Ibid., 208.

<sup>558</sup> Biamonte, "Funny, Isn't It?," 235.

relationship has always existed between destruction and production.<sup>559</sup> But since expressions of aggression, brutality and negativity have been problematic for women writers so has the mode of satire.<sup>560</sup> “Even in work being written today,” Christine Künzel explains,

aggressive forms of humour are still the exception. While the tabooisation of aggression, which to a certain extent undermines satire, also applies to male authors, the position of the female writer, already rendered precarious by its deviation from the norm, is exacerbated by her position as a *satirist* and a *woman*.<sup>561</sup>

Yet, some aggression, some destruction may prove productive, necessary even for the development of autonomy, the setting of boundaries, the assertion of self and defence of one’s interests.<sup>562</sup> January certainly pulls no punches when bashing her flashlight into Wells’ injured ribs in order to escape him during their underground confrontation.<sup>563</sup> For Little, this violent act indicates that, unlike previously, January is now willing and able to act as her own hero.<sup>564</sup> It may also be understood in light of the numerous cutting speech acts performed by Spark’s satiric heroine. Significantly, such violence is also immediately mocked by January when over the page Jimmie attempts to avenge her by challenging Wells to a physical brawl. “I wish I knew the technical terms for fights,” she muses, “for, thinking it over afterwards, this between Wells and Jimmie seemed to me rather professional.”<sup>565</sup> Her objective, impervious attitude ridicules this display of machismo while refusing to invest in the role of wide-eyed damsel in distress. This moment also illustrates Spark’s point that violence deserves to be responded to with ruthless mockery.<sup>566</sup> Barreca remarks that men are rewarded when they resort merely to verbal rather than physical aggression, “playing

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<sup>559</sup> Künzel, “The Most Dangerous Presumption,” 50.

<sup>560</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>561</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>562</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>563</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 157.

<sup>564</sup> Little, *Comedy and the Woman Writer*, 113.

<sup>565</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 159.

<sup>566</sup> Spark, “The Desegregation of Art,” 80.

out the thought that the first man to hurl an insult instead of a spear is the one who founded civilization.”<sup>567</sup> Physical violence is, however, culturally less available to women and offers a reduced chance of victory. Having learnt over time to hide any aggressive intent in irony, sarcasm and wit, women have arguably become more skilled and subtle humourists than their male foes. For Spark’s heroine, marooned alone at the creation of a new civilisation, verbal violence aids self-definition in the same way that disruption enables creation and comedy can, under the right circumstances, provide insight and incite change.

Effecting personal change has proved problematic for literary heroines of the past. Unlike the male equivalent, the female capacity for change has more often generated suffering.<sup>568</sup> In Spacks’ words,

[t]he imagined stability of women makes them potentially comprehensible; the imagined volatility of women makes them hardly worth trying to understand. But the woman who grows, develops, changes as men do denies fundamental difference. As a fictional character, such a woman, taking on a form of being generally reserved for men, endangers herself and implicitly endangers men.<sup>569</sup>

This denial of difference and threat to men has had inordinate ramifications for literary heroines, the most extreme price being death.<sup>570</sup> Death is, DuPlessis writes, “the second line of defense for the containment of female revolt, revulsion, or risk”, “the price extracted for female critique, whether explicit [...] or implicit”.<sup>571</sup> As in comic traditions, “conventional outcomes of love, of quest, were strongly identified with certain roles for women” and “any plot of self-realization was at the service of the marriage plot and was subordinate to, or covered within, the magnetic power of that ending.”<sup>572</sup> Accordingly, in the work of twentieth-century women writers, “the marriage

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<sup>567</sup> Barreca, *They Used to Call Me Snow White*, 93–94.

<sup>568</sup> Spacks, “Female Changelessness,” 282.

<sup>569</sup> Ibid.

<sup>570</sup> DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending*, 3–4.

<sup>571</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>572</sup> Ibid., 6.

plot, with its high status in novels, and the quest plot of punishment for female aspiration were displaced, eroded, or removed from the centre of the novel.”<sup>573</sup>

DuPlessis, whose theory I will return to in chapter 4, dubs this practice “writing beyond the ending, taking ending as a metaphor for conventional narrative, for a regimen of resolutions, and for the social, sexual, and ideological affirmations these make.”<sup>574</sup> In *Robinson*, Spark teases the possibility of her heroine’s death from page one, most directly by allowing her to muse

For a moment I thought perhaps they had never existed, that Robinson and his household were a dead woman’s dream, that I was indeed dead as my family believed and the newspapers had by now reported.<sup>575</sup>

Spark did, in fact, write novels and short stories in which a heroine narrates from beyond the grave. Here, however, she gleefully snatches her heroine from the jaws of literary death, giving her a happy ending that rejects the stabilising promises of traditional comedy and reinforces the chief purpose of feminist comedy – change. Instigated by January reopening her “blue exercise book wrapped in the square from Robinson’s waterproof”,<sup>576</sup> the novel closes with a series of poetic reflections using the language of growth and transformation. “Even while the journal brings before me the events of which I have written,” she ruminates, “they are transformed, there is undoubtedly a sea-change, so that the island resembles a locality of childhood, both dangerous and lyrical.”<sup>577</sup> Throughout the novel, January has transformed herself from a child into a woman, from a dependent underling into an independent heroine and from a jaded journalist into a hopeful novelist. Read in light of DuPlessis’ conclusion busting theory, Glavin’s statement that for Sparkian heroines “the fully

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<sup>573</sup> DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending*, 21.

<sup>574</sup> Ibid.

<sup>575</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 36.

<sup>576</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>577</sup> Ibid., 175.

emancipated, independent self is an asymptote, always beckoning, never attained”<sup>578</sup> becomes less defeatist and more promising. For it is not that this eventuality remains forever unattainable to Spark’s women. It simply lies beyond the final boundary of the book, in a life in which these women can continue the very human quest of personal transformation.

In *Robinson*, Spark tackles the biggest and best-known story of all, her revisionary parody destabilising a myth of genesis that has had profound implications for literary women. But her comedy does not stop at disruption or destabilisation. This is merely the first step, the cracking open of a new creative space. Spark uses this creative space to write herself into literary history and to invent an idiosyncratic style in which satire, parody, mockery, banter and irony coexist with biblical tradition, literary mythology and popular fiction. In *Robinson*, the genre of detective fiction, the myth of creation and the conventions of quest narrative are all activated in support of a female narrative of self-definition, self-authorship and transformation. Processes of transformation or conversion are often central to Spark’s narratives, but rather than reading these as essentially religious, I have here read them as essentially feminist in nature. As this chapter has illustrated, humour plays a pivotal part in Spark’s feminist philosophy. With it, January is able to resist the names, roles and categories imposed on her by her male companions and imposed on women in general by religious myths, cultural expectations and literary traditions. She is able to author her own story and, more importantly, author herself. Maturing over the course of her journey in the liminal land of Robinson, January evolves from a journalist into an artist, from a mere recorder of reality into a creator of other realities, of new myths

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<sup>578</sup> Glavin, “Muriel Spark: Beginning Again,” 304.



and future possibilities. It is these future possibilities, these wider cultural changes that I will explore in my next and final chapter.

## CHAPTER 4: A WORLD OF POSSIBILITY

*Robinson* is a text in which multiple interpretive possibilities coexist, controvert and cooperate, finally forming, in my view, a feminist message of multiplicity, polyphony and hope. Though many critics understand Spark's works as dealing in some way with the spiritual and/or artistic transformation of a (usually) female protagonist, in this chapter I will consider how such narratives hint at the possibility of more comprehensive, cultural change. In this, I am working with the theory that feminist humour ultimately seeks to effect change on a real, collective level. Up until now I have argued that January Marlow is a woman in a man's world, an othered figure who resists attempts to colonise her mind, body and art through repeated acts of comic disruption. These disruptive, creative comic acts, often overlooked or misunderstood in Spark criticism, are here interpreted as subversive feminist strategies that unsettle literary canons and conventions in order to make space for the female author's contribution. In this final chapter, I will analyse how Spark complicates the customary literary cycle of beginning, middle and end in her conclusion to *Robinson*. The refusal by the woman writer to provide the simple perfection and neat completion of traditional tales is here read, not just as a protest against an inherited and inscribed masculine form, but a call for social revolution and change. I will call firstly on Judy Little's ground-breaking theory of feminist comedy in which women writers, Spark included, purposefully abandon their readers in a liminal landscape of chaos, inversion and possibility. Next, I will look at Rachel Blau DuPlessis' theory which proposes, somewhat conversely, that women write beyond conventional conclusions in an effort to navigate outside the limitations of the

either/or choice between romantic love and personal quest that past authors and their heroines have faced. Drawing on DuPlessis' notion of the 'multiple individual', I will posit that Spark's comic heroine challenges the construction of 'woman' through discourses of sexual difference, asymmetry and limitation and ultimately anticipates a more modern, more fluid understanding of sex and gender. She is a figure of hope for womankind just as Miguel is considered here a hopeful figure for mankind, a prototype of a new man, one who maintains his innocence and integrity despite the immoral deeds and controlling characters surrounding him. Finally, seeking hope for humankind in general, I will return to the idea of utopia that I began with in chapter 1. Drawing on work by Martha Bayless, I will finish by discussing the possibility that the comic world, however problematic a sphere it has been for women, may be utopian in the sense that it offers the possibility of influence, understanding, triumph and, most significantly, membership in a more diverse and inclusive club of humanity.

## **A HUMOUR OF HOPE: REFUSING CLOSURE IN FEMINIST COMEDY**

January Marlow's final statement that "all things are possible"<sup>579</sup> is typically interpreted as a declaration of religious praise.<sup>580</sup> But taking into consideration the theories of feminist humour that have emerged in the past few decades, another interpretation presents itself. Kaufman states that feminist humour is "based on visions of change".<sup>581</sup> Performed with an "attitude of social revolution" and predicated on a "nonacceptance [*sic*] of oppression", feminist humour is the "humor of hope".<sup>582</sup> The most productive and inclusive types of feminist humour, Bing believes, suggest

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<sup>579</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 175.

<sup>580</sup> Stannard, *Muriel Spark: The Biography*, 190–91; Little, *Comedy and the Woman Writer*, 114.

<sup>581</sup> Kaufman, introduction to *Pulling Our Own Strings*, 13.

<sup>582</sup> *Ibid.*

alternatives to existing conditions.<sup>583</sup> Though most people will resist a challenge to long-held beliefs, humour presents as a benign fiction so it can prove more effective at opening closed minds to new ideas.<sup>584</sup> Hidden in its apparent harmlessness is an invitation to view the absurdity of reality and imagine how it might be altered.<sup>585</sup> Absurdity that tilts knowingly into surrealism might be said to be Spark's particular comic specialty. Barreca suggests that the subversive undercurrents of Sparkian comedy are like a submerged text, incomprehensible within the context of conventional comic theory but easy to perceive once the knack is mastered.<sup>586</sup> Certainly, the mind-bending alacrity and paradoxical spirit of Spark's comedy make it as resistant to simple, fixed explanation as any other aspect of her work. Clear singularity of meaning was never Spark's aim though, nor part of her charm. Polysemy and possibility are far more her style. According to McQuillan, her novels and short stories are always "multiple," they "always tell more than one story."<sup>587</sup> So while many critics have found fault with the abounding possibility of this novel, possibility may in fact be the point.

In *Robinson*, January visits a borderland in which the rules of the regular world are suspended yet patriarchal rule still exists in the form of Robinson's masculine religious doctrine and casually presumptuous authoritarianism. In this strange setting, the rigid control of individual identity, thought and action and the unquestioning acceptance of gender norms and behaviours become defamiliarised then ridiculed and finally thwarted. January realises that any system "which doesn't allow for the unexpected and the unwelcome is a rotten one",<sup>588</sup> meaning not just inadequate but old and decaying. The ultimate purpose then, of both January's

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<sup>583</sup> Bing, "Is Feminist Humor an Oxymoron?," 24.

<sup>584</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>585</sup> Barreca, *They Used to Call Me Snow White*, 19–20.

<sup>586</sup> Barreca, "The Ancestral Laughter of the Streets," 224.

<sup>587</sup> McQuillan, "Introduction: 'I Don't Know Anything about Freud'," 4.

<sup>588</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 162.

journey and Spark's novel, is to stimulate a disposition of openness, to suggest that a multiplicity of influence and expression is richer and sounder than a single dominating voice. Both women's texts critique the insidious imposition of identity from outside the self, the unquestioning acceptance of fixed systems or ideologies and the overweening control of a single, corruptible authority. Both stimulate "the realization that rules can be suspended", "that absolutes are only powerful when allotted power."<sup>589</sup> Indeed, it is only, Barreca continues, "when a unified, linear progression is given over to the recognition of multiplicity and diversion, that all 'else' becomes possible".<sup>590</sup> The first section of this chapter looks at interruptions to such linearity in Little's conception of feminist comedy. For her, feminist comedy as a form implies "new variations on an open human history in which all things are possible."<sup>591</sup> In Spark's fiction, she notes, "possibility is assured, – in effect, guaranteed – by an absolute, eternal openness that judges and shocks any human effort at easy closure."<sup>592</sup>

As noted in chapter 3, one of the allusive but elusive jokes in *Robinson* that irritated Kemp was Spark's "insistent trios", which include but are far from limited to the following:

January is one of three sisters, marooned with three men for three months after a plane crash in which there were just three survivors and which happened when she was flying out to research a work about three islands...<sup>593</sup>

Threes occur frequently in adages, folktales, fairytales and magic rituals.<sup>594</sup> There are countless triads in Greek mythology (heaven, hell and the underworld, three fates, three harpies) and the Christian doctrine (the father, son and holy spirit, the three

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<sup>589</sup> Barreca, introduction to *Last Laughs*, 17.

<sup>590</sup> *Ibid.*, 17–18.

<sup>591</sup> Little, *Comedy and the Woman Writer*, 188.

<sup>592</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>593</sup> Kemp, *Muriel Spark*, 37.

<sup>594</sup> Jack Tresidder, ed., *The Complete Dictionary of Symbols* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2004), 474–76.

graces, mind, body and spirit).<sup>595</sup> The number three also upsets any attempt to understand the world, or the genders in it, through a static binary system. All these meanings have relevance to Spark's text, none can be dispensed with. In discussing narrative linearity, however, it is pertinent to note that Pythagoras linked the number three to divinity, perfection and completion since it encompasses beginning, middle and end.<sup>596</sup> As such, Spark's "insistent" trios could point to a journey of growth and completion, but they could equally represent a closed system or narrative. Little and DuPlessis both, in different ways, highlight the problem that closed, linear narratives have presented for women and explore the twentieth-century female writer's solution to this longstanding literary dilemma.

I will begin with Little, who proposes that the unsettling non-closure delivered by Spark, Woolf and their fellow female comic writers is a deliberate subversion of the separation-transition-reintegration process mapped and obeyed by traditional quest narratives.<sup>597</sup> Drawing on Arnold van Gennep's tripartite structure for rites of passage, she outlines how the circular journey of the typical male hero traditionally resulted in a comedy that was conservative and stabilising, comedy that reinforced established social structures and cultural beliefs, particularly around gender.<sup>598</sup> Little posits that female writers create a more subversive, revolutionary comedy when they repudiate the final step in this three-part process. Rather than completing their comic narratives with happy endings and the re-establishment of order, female writers become feminist renegades when they abandon readers, characters and whole societies in a chaotic, inverted world in which authority is mocked, identity is stripped, behavioural norms are made redundant and new myths, motifs, norms and

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<sup>595</sup> Tresidder, *The Complete Dictionary of Symbols*, 474–76.

<sup>596</sup> *Ibid.*, 475.

<sup>597</sup> Little, *Comedy and the Woman Writer*, 3.

<sup>598</sup> *Ibid.*, 1–3.

institutions become possible.<sup>599</sup> Indeed, in feminist comedy, everything is mocked, “all the way down to myth, the archetypes expressive of ‘God’ or of our biological and social chemistry”.<sup>600</sup> Even the Christian mysticism present in Spark’s work “serves to inspire and reinforce a very radical politics and a very radical feminist comedy”.<sup>601</sup> For Little, comedy and social revolution are both close to danger since both are a “prelude to action”, a portent of psychological and political change.<sup>602</sup>

Distinctly absent of any reintegration ritual that reaffirms the traditional values of marriage, family, femininity or motherhood, the ending of *Robinson* is as uneasy as any of Spark’s novels. January’s reunion with her family, who have stolen her most precious possessions in her absence, is fraught with tension.<sup>603</sup> Robinson is forced to desert his masculine stronghold to perpetually wander the earth in search of a new utopia.<sup>604</sup> Miguel returns to the world to seek his education, though January quickly loses track of him.<sup>605</sup> Jimmie is abandoned in transit, with no final flourish given to his tall tales, let alone clarification on whether or not they were true.<sup>606</sup> Wells is imprisoned, but only for a short stretch.<sup>607</sup> Though Spark’s heroine returns to the “real” world, it is the liminal world of the island that remains prominent and in focus. January herself remains happily single, a condition that in any other genre might elicit pity or heartache. “No wonder,” Barreca remarks, “women’s comedy has gone unseen or misread; pain is projected into the female character’s pleasure, unhappiness onto her joy.”<sup>608</sup> She notes that endings in female comic literature often include “elements usually regarded as tragic” and “an attendant sense of

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<sup>599</sup> Little, *Comedy and the Woman Writer*, 2, 4, 6.

<sup>600</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>601</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>602</sup> *Ibid.*, 146, 187–88.

<sup>603</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 169–73.

<sup>604</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>605</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>606</sup> *Ibid.*, 171–72.

<sup>607</sup> *Ibid.*, 173–74.

<sup>608</sup> Barreca, “‘Untamed and Unabashed’,” 24.

dislocation”.<sup>609</sup> Frequently, “the *refusal* to supply closure has been misread as an *inability* to do so, as a failure of imagination and talent on the part of the writer.”<sup>610</sup> But female comedy depends on the process not the conclusion, on recognition rather than resolution.<sup>611</sup> More than recognition, Hélène Cixous writes that the feminist practice of non-closure is “not an opportunity for destruction but for wonderful expansion”.<sup>612</sup> The open conclusions featured in so much female comedy break the mould of traditional comedy and, in doing so, suggest that a new definition of the form is required, one less reliant on conventional happy endings and more open to new possibilities.

Little’s theory, posed before Bakhtinian theory exploded onto the English-speaking academic scene, certainly bears strong resemblances to Bakhtin’s infamous comic carnival. Mentioning Bakhtin’s influential analysis of Rabelais only in passing, Little does not (perhaps, due to the availability of translations, could not) delve into the differences between her theory of festival imagery and holiday ritual and Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque. Neither has such a comparison been forthcoming in the intervening years. Perhaps one major difference lies in the notion that Little’s theory posits “a reinterpretation of liminality itself”, one in which “the archetypal imagery is in the first place suggestive of a female iconography, not a male one; and secondly, the mythic imagery is treated ironically. It is seen neither as sacred scripture nor as secular scripture.”<sup>613</sup> While a detailed feminist examination of Bakhtinian theory is beyond the scope of this project, it is worth noting that Bakhtin uses the female body to connote, amongst other things, “the corporeal grave of man

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<sup>609</sup> Barreca, “‘Untamed and Unabashed’,” 24.

<sup>610</sup> Ibid.

<sup>611</sup> Ibid.

<sup>612</sup> Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minnesota, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 86.

<sup>613</sup> Little, *Comedy and the Woman Writer*, 3, 187.



and the cavity of his birth”.<sup>614</sup> Feminist comedy, as chapters 1 and 2 of this thesis explored, also utilises female imagery, but in a radically different way. Rooted in the primary world of the mother/child relationship, maternal myths and images of womanhood are particular resistant to change, having been internalised over time.<sup>615</sup> But by destabilising the realm of motherhood, marriage and family, female comic writers rob readers of a comforting sense of a stable, sacred home that acts as fortification against the precarious forces of war, death, politics and the economy.<sup>616</sup> According to Little, this leaves their characters, worlds and readers feeling “homeless”.<sup>617</sup>

Here, we might recall Kemp’s statement that, in *Robinson*, Spark’s survivors never realise the sort of communal kinship lauded by Defoe’s utopia or Wyss’ family.<sup>618</sup> We might also recall Little’s own statement that the “home” world of *Robinson* is absent.<sup>619</sup> Equally, we might remember January’s resistance to the institutions of marriage, motherhood and family, discussed in chapters 2 and 3. Yet, it is possibly Miguel who best exemplifies the homeless, family-less quality of female literary comedy. Orphaned, this character’s experience of family – if Robinson, January, Wells and Jimmie can be said to form one – is one of suspicion, competition, hostility and violence. He is refused both a protective father figure in Robinson and nurturing mother figure in January. This kind of deliberate unravelling of the familial structure may be an ancillary feature of Bakhtin’s comic carnival but it is not its focus. As Renate Lachmann et al. write,

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<sup>614</sup> Renate Lachmann, Raoul Eshelman, and Marc Davis, “Bakhtin and Carnival: Culture as Counter-Culture,” *Cultural Critique*, no. 11 (Winter, 1988/1989): 149, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1354246>.

<sup>615</sup> Little, *Comedy and the Woman Writer*, 12.

<sup>616</sup> *Ibid.*, 14

<sup>617</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>618</sup> Kemp, *Muriel Spark*, 31.

<sup>619</sup> Little, *Comedy and the Woman Writer*, 115.

[t]he spectacle staged by carnivalesque rituals is not actually directed against institutions, whose functions and forms are only usurped for a temporary period of time, but rather against the loss of utopian potential brought about by dogma and authority.<sup>620</sup>

Though there is an element of permanency to Bakhtin's conception of carnival, after the ritual ends, only laughter remains as a transtemporal, universal force capable of moving beyond crisis to actual change.<sup>621</sup> Gender is unquestionably upended in this process but Bakhtin's main focus is on the interaction between official and unofficial culture, with folk culture providing the improving force that temporarily invades the centralised culture.<sup>622</sup> Ultimately, as in the quest narrative, carnival ends in regeneration and return:

The temporary immersion of official culture in folk culture leads to a process of regeneration that sets in motion and dynamically energizes the notions of value and hierarchy inverted by the parodic counter-norms of the carnival. In this way the culture of laughter revives and regenerates the petrified remains of official institutions and, as it were, hands them back to official culture [...] The procedures of profanation, degradation, mesalliance, and familiarization are thus unable to affect permanently the official culture.<sup>623</sup>

In feminist comedy, this handing over or handing back rarely takes place. Indeed, Little asserts that, in Spark's case, her

comic novels are traditional in that they employ the liminal patterns of inversion, life crisis, or festivity, but these patterns are used in massively concentrated doses, and the novels do not finally circle back to an affirmation of the old order – the old order scrutinized and renewed but still the old order.<sup>624</sup>

This ability to remain outside the old order is, Little suggests, the legitimate province of writers who are themselves outsiders.<sup>625</sup> As a Scot of English and Jewish heritage, Spark self-identified as an exile, living throughout her artistic, nomadic life

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<sup>620</sup> Lachmann, Eshelman, and Davis, "Bakhtin and Carnival: Culture as Counter-Culture," 130.

<sup>621</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>622</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>623</sup> Ibid.

<sup>624</sup> Little, *Comedy and the Woman Writer*, 99.

<sup>625</sup> Ibid., 100.

in Scotland, South Africa, England, America and Italy.<sup>626</sup> This mixing of multiple cultures, according to Cheyette, “inevitably creates a sense in which any one ideology can be viewed from an estranged and defamiliarized perspective.”<sup>627</sup> The power of the peripheral is, moreover, far more accessible to women than it is to men.<sup>628</sup> “While it is true,” Barreca elaborates,

that traditional forms of masculine humor have recorded their revolt against certain inequities in a given social system, there remains a difference between how men and women approach the subject of their irreverence. Women have been outsiders in this culture, but when they use humor, they become outlaws. [...] The most economically oppressed of male writers nevertheless writes from a position of privilege awarded to him by a culture than equates value with maleness in much the same way as an Anglo writer writes from a position of privilege in the Western world [...] The difference then, between men’s humor and women’s humor, is the difference between revolt and revolution.<sup>629</sup>

Here, Barreca suggests that gender is not the only factor that can contribute to cultural marginalisation. Rather than depicting a struggle between life and death, official and unofficial culture or men and women, comedy can, at its best, offer the opportunity for one marginal voice to admit another. Emanating from the margins, the female comic voice allows for the possible discursive involvement of other similarly marginalised voices. In advocating openness, polyphony and dialogical equality, feminist comedy perpetuates, not a continuing system of binary oppositions, but a spectrum of different, valuable and visible cultural experiences. Again, this is hinted at in *Robinson* with the character of Miguel whose youth and racial otherness position him as a figure of difference and disenfranchisement. Miguel and January are both exiles and outsiders, able to observe the central culture of the island from

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<sup>626</sup> Stannard, *Muriel Spark: The Biography*, 2–3.

<sup>627</sup> Cheyette, “Writing Against Conversion,” 99.

<sup>628</sup> Barreca, “The Ancestral Laughter of the Streets,” 231.

<sup>629</sup> Barreca, “‘Untamed and Unabashed’,” 15–16.

slightly different marginal perspectives and capable of altering the world they return to, not through a process of transitory revolt, but one of endless revolution.

## SEX, GENDER AND ALTERNATIVE FUTURES

Where Little posits that women writers halt before the narrative's prescribed ending, DuPlessis claims that they continue writing beyond it. "No convention," she states, "is neutral, purely mimetic, or purely aesthetic", and "[o]ne of the greatest moments of ideological negotiation in any work occurs in the choice of a resolution."<sup>630</sup> Identifying a problematic contradiction between love and quest in the writings of nineteenth-century women, DuPlessis explores how many twentieth-century women replaced the narrow alternatives of marriage or death with a wider set of choices.<sup>631</sup> These new endings actively dispute conventional romance plots in which the female protagonist is muffled, her quest is repressed, heterosexual ties are valorised, sexual asymmetry and difference are reinforced and coupledness becomes synonymous with success.<sup>632</sup> "Writing beyond the ending," DuPlessis explains, "means the transgressive invention of narrative strategies" that deny or reconstruct "seductive patterns of feeling that are culturally mandated, internally policed, hegemonically poised."<sup>633</sup> For her, there exists

a consistent project that unites some twentieth-century women writers across the century, writers who examine how social practices surrounding gender have entered into narrative, and who consequently use narrative to make critical statements about the psychosexual and sociocultural construction of women.<sup>634</sup>

Though Spark is not one of the authors covered and though she does not exhibit all of the narrative strategies DuPlessis outlines, three are present. The first strategy is

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<sup>630</sup> DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending*, 2–3.

<sup>631</sup> *Ibid.*, 3–4.

<sup>632</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>633</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>634</sup> *Ibid.*

the use of a female artist figure around whom the *Künstlerromane* (artist novel) is focalised and in whom is encoded “the conflict between any empowered woman and the barriers to her achievement.”<sup>635</sup> As “it is expression and the desire to refuse silence that are at issue in artistic creation”, the female artist epitomises the expressive, dissident capacity of all women who find themselves trapped in a world in which self-realisation and ambition are considered a female crime.<sup>636</sup> Seeking to reform this world, the female writer “creates the ethical role of the artist by making her imaginatively depict and try to change the life in which she is also immersed.”<sup>637</sup>

Less discernible in Spark is a second feminist strategy, described by DuPlessis as a biographical drama that is “engaged with a maternal figure” and “is often compensatory for her losses.”<sup>638</sup> She explains that

[t]he younger artist’s future project as a creator lies in completing the fragmentary and potential work of the mother [...] For the mother is also an artist. She has written, sung, made, or created, but her work, because in unconventional media, is muted and unrecognized.<sup>639</sup>

This mother/daughter co-authorial relationship may separate women by more than one generation.<sup>640</sup> Carroll Smith-Rosenberg notes that while the “category of sister implies equality, an absolute identification”, the mother-daughter relationship “implies a hierarchy of power, the right of mothers to criticize and restrain”.<sup>641</sup> In *Robinson*, January’s mother is noticeably absent and her sisters do not share her artistic sensibility. So this maternal collaboration exists only in fleeting remembrances of her gypsy grandmother who

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<sup>635</sup> DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending*, 84.

<sup>636</sup> *Ibid.*, 85, 87.

<sup>637</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>638</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>639</sup> *Ibid.*, 93–94.

<sup>640</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>641</sup> Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “Writing History: Language, Class, and Gender,” in De Lauretis, *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, 50.

used to recite a little rhyme to the new moon, no matter where, or in what busy street she might be [...] setting herself apart on the road, intent on the pale crescent against the deepening northern sky...<sup>642</sup>

This ritual is lifted directly from Spark's memories of her mother and is one she maintained.<sup>643</sup> Spark elaborated on this tradition in her short story, "The Gentile Jewesses", in which the fictionalised mother figure "yokes together Christianity, Buddhism and Judaism and this all-embracing pluralism becomes a version of women's otherness."<sup>644</sup> Spark's own much misinterpreted religious conversion, Cheyette adds, "enabled her to occupy more than one space in her fiction", to develop "a fictional practice which is plural and partial and embraces a multiple sense of self."<sup>645</sup> In *Robinson*, January remembers finding her grandmother's new moon ritual embarrassing as a child, though she too grows into it, masquerading as a gypsy to gleefully dupe her misogynistic brother-in-law.<sup>646</sup> January's gypsy past and Spark's atypically lyrical description of her grandmother's ghost here hint at an obscure female talent for plurality. But both also seem to allude to all the lost poems, rhymes and songs of a muted female past, all the unremembered female artists who stood a little apart from their incredulous culture and chronicled the beauty they saw in the world in an all but faded whisper.

The third and perhaps most pertinent strategy DuPlessis explores in her study is the portrayal by female writers of the "multiple individual". This individual makes visible and viable those categories of sexual identity and gender expression that the heteronormative ideal of romance marginalises. DuPlessis believes that the

capacity for fusing opposite perspectives, for seeing things from so many viewpoints, for understanding multiple and divergent opinions, makes women multiple individuals. But further, as individuals, they

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<sup>642</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 8.

<sup>643</sup> Spark, *Curriculum Vitae*, 38.

<sup>644</sup> Cheyette, "Writing Against Conversion," 104.

<sup>645</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>646</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 9, 94.

have less-defined boundaries and stronger desires for these plural identifications.<sup>647</sup>

This pull towards plurality in women's fiction means that "alternative and oppositional stories about women, men, and community can be constructed beyond the teleological formulations of quest and romance."<sup>648</sup> In their narratives, "effort is devoted to depicting masculine and feminine sides in one character" and a rewriting of gender is informed by negotiations between difference and sameness, marginality and inclusion.<sup>649</sup> The resistance to marriage in female narratives thus indicates a greater "resistance to the production of women by gender polarization, gender asymmetry, gender limitations."<sup>650</sup> If, as DuPlessis posits, a critique of the romance plot implies a critique of the gendering process, then the multiple individual represents an attitude of plurality and fluidity around concepts of sex and gender. Central to DuPlessis' alternative sex-gender system is her view of a permanent liminality that "accepts all, judges nothing, has a totalizing both/and vision."<sup>651</sup> It involves "constant transition that does not crystallize into any 'state' (married or single, male or female, one opinion versus another)" but instead "ends gender scripts by dissolving alternative, polarized, either/or possibilities into infinite potentiality."<sup>652</sup> This infinite both/and vision, as opposed to the finite either/or polarisation of heteronormativity, DuPlessis relates to Woolf's earlier notion of androgyny.<sup>653</sup> Writing in 1928, Woolf states that

it is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or a woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly.<sup>654</sup>

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<sup>647</sup> DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending*, 153.

<sup>648</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>649</sup> *Ibid.*, 37, 43.

<sup>650</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>651</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>652</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>653</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>654</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Panther Books, 1985), 99.

Critics have observed that, in *Robinson*, though the male aspect of the island is emphasised and the female aspect deemphasised, it could be considered an androgynous landscape,<sup>655</sup> “claimed by turns by male and female identities”.<sup>656</sup> This liminal terrain, like all liminal spaces, is suggestive of bisexuality, of an in-between or unfixed sexual identity.<sup>657</sup> A certain androgyny is present in Spark’s heroine too, who boasts of a quality of mind that is “slightly masculine” then, over the page, sulks over lipstick and the state of her dress.<sup>658</sup> We have already seen, in chapter 1, January’s potential to move between, take on and take off different expressions of gender. With her masculine temperament and feminine playfulness, she is dubbed by Cheyette one of Spark’s “unifying women”.<sup>659</sup> She unites a series of opposites – male and female, material and spiritual, Christian and pagan, rational and intuitive, natural and supernatural included.<sup>660</sup> Her name, inspired by her newness and her association with the dual-facing Janus, may then yield another connotation. For DuPlessis finds other Janus-like figures in the texts she studies, prototypes of a new human being that combines the qualities of feminine and masculine and, sexually speaking, “looks both ways”.<sup>661</sup>

Writing on the female grotesque, Russo suggests that it is easier for women to imagine and inhabit a combination of the feminine and masculine genders since some level of “transvestism” has always been necessary for women to take part in a man’s world.<sup>662</sup> Rosie White points out that, whenever women are both feminine and funny, they immediately become gender inappropriate.<sup>663</sup> They occupy an

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<sup>655</sup> Little, *Comedy and the Woman Writer*, 110.

<sup>656</sup> Książopolska, “The Missing Body,” 2.

<sup>657</sup> Little, *Comedy and the Woman Writer*, 4.

<sup>658</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 29–30.

<sup>659</sup> Cheyette, *Muriel Spark*, 96.

<sup>660</sup> *Ibid.*, 31–32.

<sup>661</sup> DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending*, 150.

<sup>662</sup> Russo, “Female Grotesques,” 224.

<sup>663</sup> Rosie White, “Funny Women,” *Feminist Media Studies* 10, no. 3 (2010): 357, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2010.493665>.



“uncomfortable position”, for they “connote both masculine and feminine identities, becoming transgender figures”.<sup>664</sup> This female ability to combine, conceal, augment and play with gender identities has already been touched on in chapter 1 when discussing moments of masquerade and grotesquery performed by Spark’s embodied comic heroine. DuPlessis finds many grotesque depictions of heterosexuality in women’s literature which refuses the “story” of gender polarisation and hierarchy.<sup>665</sup> Spark’s protagonist encounters one of these grotesque depictions of heterosexuality in Tom Wells who remarks that Robinson is “not a lady’s man” and adds

‘There’s your boyfriend too. He’s another.’  
 ‘Another?’  
 ‘Queer.’  
 ‘What?’  
 ‘Homosexuals, both of them. Disgusting. Unnatural.’ He pushed away his plate as if that too were disgusting and unnatural.<sup>666</sup>

This punctuating gesture clarifies where Spark’s contempt lies. January herself remarks

I have come across men before who imagine that every other man who does not rapidly make physical contact with his female prey is a homosexual. And some who I know regard all celibates as homosexuals.<sup>667</sup>

After Wells warns her that “these homos can be spiteful”, January refuses to discuss the subject with him further, incapable as he is of understanding that the crinkle of a finger or the wave of a man’s hair do not irrefutably establish his sexuality.<sup>668</sup> Though Jimmie admits that he has “the instinct for the gentlemen [...] as likewise for the ladies”,<sup>669</sup> Robinson and Jimmie do not join the cast of gay male characters who pepper Spark’s novels. Their sexuality is not conclusively

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<sup>664</sup> White, “Funny Women,” 356.

<sup>665</sup> DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending*, 143, 146.

<sup>666</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 96–97.

<sup>667</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>668</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>669</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

established but remains open to interpretation. In *Robinson*, these underlying hints of homosexuality, bisexuality, androgyny and gender fluidity gesture faintly towards a more twenty-first-century understanding of sex and gender than was available in the 1950s. But Spark's long-term relationship with companion and collaborator Penelope Jardine and January's strong affiliation with female culture place both author and character very firmly on Rich's lesbian continuum. For Rich, this "crushed, invalidated" continuum includes a range of "woman-identified experience".<sup>670</sup> It embraces "many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, [and] the giving and receiving of practical and political support."<sup>671</sup> It is perhaps not surprising then to find underpinning one of Spark's works a muted but subversive view of gender, sexuality and gender expression suggestive of more possibilities than the two-sex model has historically allowed.

This multiple "new person" that DuPlessis envisions re-forms the long-sanctified plots and archetypes of quest and romance, breaking old myths of gender with new myths of critique.<sup>672</sup> These myths, she writes,

replace archetypes with prototypes. They do not investigate moments of eternal recurrence, but rather break with the idea of an essentially unchanging reality. Prototypes are original, model forms on which to base the self and its action—forms open to transformation, and forms, unlike archetypes, that offer similar patterns of experience to others, rather than imposing patterns on others [...] A prototype is not a binding, timeless pattern, but one critically open to the possibility, even the necessity, of its transformation.<sup>673</sup>

January is one such prototype. Miguel, I would suggest, is – or may become – another. Miguel, like the other males on the island, has a double in January's home

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<sup>670</sup> Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs* 5, no. 4 (Summer 1980): 632, 648, [www.jstor.org/stable/3173834](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173834).

<sup>671</sup> *Ibid.*, 648–49.

<sup>672</sup> DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending*, 129.

<sup>673</sup> *Ibid.*, 133–34.

reality. Though she seems to have an easy relationship with her grown son, Brian has, it is hinted, already been absorbed into the worst aspects of masculine culture. As with Miguel's infatuation with Wells, January is alarmed to see her son delighted with Curly Lonsdale's world of fast cars, cigarettes, cards and alcohol. During one of Spark's analeptic asides, Brian tells his mother

'Curly's going to take me to the races when the season starts.'  
 'Did they give you anything to drink?' I said.  
 'Oh yes. There was ginger ale. Sam – that's one of Curly's friends – gave Curly a snifter – that's brandy, you see, and I think he was pouring out one for me, but Curly said, "Something soft for the youngster, Sam, else his old woman's going to create." That was awfully funny, because Curly winked at me; and he looked awfully funny.'  
 'Were there any ladies?'  
 'No,' said Brian. 'No dames. But there was a photo of a smasher on the piano.'<sup>674</sup>

January's minimal responses in this exchange are another example of the female comic writer simply letting masculine culture, with its casual misogyny, represent and ridicule itself. But they also reveal resignation regarding the loss of her son to this debauched culture. When it comes to the untoward influence of Wells or Robinson upon Miguel, however, January is far from resigned. The above scene with Brian is inserted into a scene in which Miguel curiously plunders Wells' magic charms and occult magazine, glaringly named by Spark *Your Future*. Miguel's linguistic innocence in this pages-long scene creates some snappy comic dialogue under which lies a much weightier ethical point. Intrigued by the magazine, Miguel demands more than once: "Show me the Future."<sup>675</sup> After January encourages Wells to let Miguel see the magazine, Wells laments, "What's going to happen about *Your Future* I don't know".<sup>676</sup> "Is this the Future?" Miguel asks later in the exchange,

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<sup>674</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 54.

<sup>675</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>676</sup> *Ibid.*

holding up one of Wells' cabbalistic medallions.<sup>677</sup> "Give me *Your Future*," he continues to exhort, sounding like the blackmailer he may become if he follows his hero's example.<sup>678</sup> "Give him *Your Future*," January echoes, wanting for him what he wants for himself.<sup>679</sup> Almost as soon as Miguel is given *Your Future*, Robinson arrives to take it away and rip it to shreds.<sup>680</sup> Once the spat subsides, January collects the torn pages and begins piecing them back together.<sup>681</sup> All this wordplay establishes Miguel's future as a terrain at risk of colonisation by outside forces and ideologies. Wells unconsciously and Robinson consciously seek to possess this terrain by curbing Miguel's curiosity, impeding his access to information and controlling his choices and therefore his prospects. January does not wish to possess Miguel's future – she seeks to reconstruct then hand it back to him, to do with what he pleases.

The final one-on-one interaction between January and Miguel occurs shortly before Robinson's reappearance and towards the end of Wells' tyrannical reign. Under intense pressure herself to acquiesce to Wells' version of events, January asks Miguel if he knows what a lie is:

He said, 'Yes.'

'What is a lie?'

He screwed up his face to search his memory, then he said, 'When you say something is different from what you think it is.' It sounded like a set piece of Robinson's teaching. Although truthful, I was not sure that he understood the formula.<sup>682</sup>

Persisting, she attempts to determine whether there remains in Miguel the potential to stand by his own version of events, to conceive of an ethical framework other than the one he has been programmed to believe:

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<sup>677</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 57.

<sup>678</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>679</sup> Ibid.

<sup>680</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>681</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>682</sup> Ibid., 145.

I said, 'What do you think happened to Robinson?'  
 'Someone killed him,' he said.  
 'Who do you think killed him?'  
 'The Parroveevil,' he said.  
 'Say it again.'  
 He repeated it twice, and presently I discerned the influence of Tom Wells and his Power of Evil.  
 'Suppose someone said that Robinson fell down, alone by himself on the mountain, and was killed?'  
 'Who said it?'  
 'Suppose someone said it, what would that be?'  
 He said, 'A mistake.'  
 I said, 'Do you remember the things we found when we were looking for Robinson?'  
 He said, 'All the clothes.'  
 'That's right. What did they look like?'  
 'They were all over blood,' he said.  
 'Suppose,' I continued, 'that one of us said we didn't find any clothes at all, and that there wasn't any blood?'  
 'That would be silly,' he said.  
 'Would it be true?'  
 'No, they would be making a mistake.'  
 I thought, what odds if he doesn't know what a lie is, so long as he speaks the truth? And by his puzzled look I was satisfied that the present conversation would stick in his mind.<sup>683</sup>

Acting in the climactic exchange between these two characters as a kind of Socratic figure, January asks Miguel open questions that require him to rely on what he himself thinks and remembers. She gives only one affirmation of his experience, when it overlaps with hers. She does not correct his expression since it is more important that he use his own words than the correct ones. Though she registers the influence of Wells, along with the influence of Robinson, some of Miguel's innocence seemingly remains. January can therefore send him on his way, trusting in his ability to separate his own thinking from the ideologies of others. Like her, Miguel is freed from the influence of Robinson and Wells at the end of Spark's novel. After being sent to school, his ability to question small narratives will hopefully transform into the ability to question much more insidious master narratives. The "ritual of education,"

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<sup>683</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 145–46.

Little points out, “is always potentially a liminal one, being an extended period between childhood and adulthood and socially an initiation into the roles and values of adult life.”<sup>684</sup> Indeed, simply by virtue of his youth, Miguel can be said to be a prototype, a form necessarily open to possibility and change. Like January, he may grow into a being that offers rather than imposes patterns of experience. Glavin is perhaps right when he writes that there is no possibility for transformation in Spark’s men<sup>685</sup> – Robinson, Wells, Jimmie and even Brian do not offer this glimmer of hope. Hope for mankind in *Robinson* lies not in the current generation but in the next. Like January, Miguel’s transformation will continue beyond the boundary of the book in a future that Spark’s readers must imagine then actualise.

## HOW TO WIN FRIENDS, INFLUENCE PEOPLE AND CHANGE THE WORLD

I began this thesis with a reading of the opening map of Robinson and by understanding Spark’s imaginary island as an intertextually loaded literary device that activates boundaries between people, genders and worlds. Another intertext undoubtedly evoked in *Robinson* is Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516), which also begins with a woodcut illustration of its island setting. More’s classic, like Spark’s imitation, was posed as a factual, autobiographical account, combining elements of the era’s epistolary novel and travel literature. It depicts an idealised yet highly regulated society, rooted in Catholicism and presided over by a strict patriarchy.<sup>686</sup> Intended as wishful dreams or fantasies, literary utopias hope to improve society by identifying its flaws.<sup>687</sup> Often using satire and exaggeration, these texts “hold the present up to

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<sup>684</sup> Little, *Comedy and the Woman Writer*, 128.

<sup>685</sup> Glavin, “Muriel Spark: Beginning Again,” 303.

<sup>686</sup> Lyman Tower Sargent, *Utopianism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 2.

<sup>687</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

ridicule.”<sup>688</sup> Yet, the better worlds they postulate can unconsciously mirror the faults inherent in their cultures of origin, as More’s text does with its separatist, hierarchal approach to gender. Spark’s simple but ironic twist on this genre is to make this mirroring entirely conscious. She deliberately evokes the utopian genre then depicts her far from brave new world as strikingly similar to the flawed one in which her protagonist and readers live. As Barreca notes, Spark’s oeuvre implies that “the world of ‘as if’ and the world of ‘as is’ are not, in fact, separated by anything except perception and acknowledgment.”<sup>689</sup> With *Robinson*, she refuses to deliver either an inspiring utopian vision of the past or a chilling dystopian vision of the future. Instead, using the female practise of literalisation discussed in chapter 2, she takes this word back to its literal meaning of ‘no place’.<sup>690</sup> In doing so, she suggests that a utopia formed by human beings of this earth cannot exist as they will only replicate their cultural beliefs and biases wherever they go. A change of location is not what is required. What is required is a change of mind.

For Cixous, writing is “*the very possibility of change*, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures” (emphasis original).<sup>691</sup> In an effort to explore such possibilities and effect such change, many women writers have penned works that employ philosophic speculation, utopian fantasy, science fiction and futuristic vision.<sup>692</sup> This kind of speculative fiction has

allowed women writers to satirize the patriarchal culture they inhabit by contrasting it with imagined worlds in which the values and welfare of women are ascendant if not exclusive. The utopian impulse is implicit in the work of a number of female humourists.<sup>693</sup>

<sup>688</sup> Sargent, *Utopianism*, 24.

<sup>689</sup> Barreca, “Metaphor-into-Narrative,” 248.

<sup>690</sup> Sargent, *Utopianism*, 2.

<sup>691</sup> Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1, no. 4 (Summer 1976): 879, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3173239>.

<sup>692</sup> Walker, *A Very Serious Thing*, 57.

<sup>693</sup> Ibid.

Indeed, fantasy has been found to be a pronounced feature of female humour.<sup>694</sup> Though the humour of different subcultures is rooted in real-life experiences and society at large has become more egalitarian in its humour use, some differences do remain.<sup>695</sup> One difference between female and male humour is in their appreciation of fantasy material, for “[w]hat men dismiss as unreal and detached from themselves, women can perceive as vivid, emotion-laden, and as integrally related to the psyche.”<sup>696</sup> In literary contexts, the fusion of humour and speculation allows the woman writer to imaginatively detach herself from cultural restrictions, abandon contemporary realities and create a new world order.<sup>697</sup> Of course, speculation of this kind has also activated the possibility that cultural change may not be positive, resulting in feminist dystopian fictions.<sup>698</sup> Such visions, frequently posed with a satiric edge, are far from exclusive to women, as the many utopian and dystopian fictions by male writers can attest. Indeed, this genre could be said to be ancient as satire is. “Satirists,” Ruben Quintero writes, “were our first utopians.”<sup>699</sup> Concerned not only

with what has happened but also with what may happen, the satirist, through an historical logic of inference and extrapolation into the future, may also serve as a cautionary prophet or an idealistic visionary.<sup>700</sup>

Satirists aim to change minds, to sway an audience to a better way of thinking.<sup>701</sup> Yet, in many comic forms, the reader or audience is described as having an enhanced level of autonomy in producing a work’s ultimate meaning. Satire establishes a conspiratorial intimacy between the satirist, reader and the object of attack, which

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<sup>694</sup> Sheppard, “Continuity and Change,” 10.

<sup>695</sup> Ibid.

<sup>696</sup> Ibid., 10–11.

<sup>697</sup> Walker, *A Very Serious Thing*, 57.

<sup>698</sup> Walker, *The Disobedient Writer*, 79.

<sup>699</sup> Quintero, “Introduction: Understanding Satire,” 3.

<sup>700</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>701</sup> Ibid., 3.



produces the reader as “another participant in verbal espionage and secret-telling”.<sup>702</sup> Irony, Lisa Colletta writes, “is not only a quality belonging to texts, or to the creators of those texts. It requires a reader.”<sup>703</sup> Camp is not automatically oppositional; an audience must “complete the subversion”.<sup>704</sup> And parody, with its “liberating effect”, can be produced by a reader or audience, without any comic intent by the originator.<sup>705</sup> In comedy, the mind is a vital site of intellectual communion and ideological challenge. Using this form has enabled women, not just to open minds, but to change them. A novel can, according to Spark, effect this kind of real-world change: “I would hope,” she told McQuillan in 1998, “that everything I write changes something, opens windows in people’s minds”.<sup>706</sup>

In the first sentence of *Robinson*, Spark has her protagonist describe her mock utopia as a “landscape of the mind”.<sup>707</sup> In her final analysis, she returns to this idea, noting that, “I had already come to think of the island as a place of the mind.”<sup>708</sup> Recalling the sulphurous cave from which she emerged anew, she adds, that, after sinking into the sea, Robinson

is now, indeed, an apocryphal island. It may be a trick of the mind to sink one’s past fear and exasperation in the waters of memory; it may be a truth of the mind.”<sup>709</sup>

Caves feature frequently in female utopian fictions as places where visions are made possible.<sup>710</sup> The cave “is not just the place from which the past is retrieved but the

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<sup>702</sup> Rabb, “The Secret Life of Satire,” 575, 577.

<sup>703</sup> Lisa Colletta, “Postmodernity and the Gendered Uses of Political Satire,” in *Women and Comedy: History, Theory, Practice*, eds. Peter Dickinson, Anne Higgins, Paul Matthew St Pierre, and Sean Zwagerman (Teaneck, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; Maryland, M.D.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, 2013), 222, ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>704</sup> Chuck Kleinhans, “Taking Out the Trash: Camp and the Politics of Parody,” in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, ed. Moe Meyer (London: Routledge, 1994), 195.

<sup>705</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>706</sup> McQuillan, “The Same Informed Air,” 222.

<sup>707</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 7.

<sup>708</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>709</sup> *Ibid.*, 174–75.

<sup>710</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 102.

place where the future is conceived”.<sup>711</sup> This future, for many female writers or feminist humourists, is one in which human progress and liberation from totalitarian tendencies can only occur via an improvement in consciousness.<sup>712</sup> The pursuit of consciousness has thus become the foundation of many female speculative fictions, since the mind is understood as the primary site for the activity of change.<sup>713</sup>

DuPlessis explains that

[t]o change ideas about the world, and to depict such a change, it is logical that narrative, as a site of ideology, should focus on mind, as a site of ideology. These quests of consciousness have, moreover, as their major action the changing of seeing, perceiving, and understanding for characters.<sup>714</sup>

Chapter 2 of this thesis concentrated on the individual transformation of the character of January, on her quest of consciousness. But in a fairly typical complaint about Spark’s work, Kemp writes that the characters of *Robinson* “arrang[e] themselves obligingly into categories”, and “serve not much more than a narrative function.”<sup>715</sup> This is, however, standard for speculative literature by women in which “characters may be flat because they represent compendia of typical traits, or because they function like manifestos”.<sup>716</sup> Robinson, Jimmie and Wells each represent compendia of typical traits so they never change, or seek to. January, and to an extent Miguel, function more like manifestos in favour of freedom, possibility and change. Spark’s speculative fiction aligns with similar feminist works in that “the ideas, not the characters are well-rounded.”<sup>717</sup> It is ideas, after all, that challenge ideologies. And it is much more important, in Spark’s view, that real-life readers,

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<sup>711</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 102

<sup>712</sup> DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending*, 196.

<sup>713</sup> Ibid., 196–97.

<sup>714</sup> Ibid., 197.

<sup>715</sup> Kemp, *Muriel Spark*, 36.

<sup>716</sup> DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending*, 179.

<sup>717</sup> Ibid.

rather than fictional characters, be given the liberty and opportunity to change their minds.

In order to gain the opportunity to change people's minds, women have first had to win audiences over to considering their perspective. For Martha Bayless, the comic world is in some ways a female-friendly "pocket Utopia" that has long offered women this opportunity.<sup>718</sup> Writing on medieval comic narratives, Bayless notes that this world is "a world of the fulfilment of appetites, of pleasure without punishment, and of sensual delight".<sup>719</sup> Generally, the women depicted in these comic texts

have the pragmatism and the cleverness to satisfy these bodily appetites. It is thus women who have the happy endings—women are the supreme embodiment of this mode. Unsuccessful striving is the tragic mode. Successful striving is the comic mode.<sup>720</sup>

These women are, moreover, "supremely adept at trickery. In a world where deception is the key to success, they are the most successful of all."<sup>721</sup> The association of women with debased materiality, sexual debauchery and deception, however successful, does more to prove the comic world a vehicle for male writers' misogynistic contempt and fear than to prove it the utopian paradise Bayless sets out to argue. She goes on to point out, however, that the contemptibility of women is at odds with the audience's experience, for these women win, not just food and sexual partners but, more importantly, the point of view, audience identification and sympathy.<sup>722</sup> According to Bayless, the typically wily wife is an underdog figure who represents

the secret stance of every listener, even a male listener: a person who feels he has not gotten his fair share, has worked harder than he should have to, who is constantly struggling against opposing forces,

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<sup>718</sup> Martha Bayless, "Is the Comic World a Paradise for Women? Medieval Models of Portable Utopia," in *Laughter, Humor, and the (Un)Making of Gender: Historical and Cultural Perspectives*, eds. Anna Foka and Jonas Liliequist (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) 31.

<sup>719</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>720</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>721</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>722</sup> *Ibid.*, 41–42.

and who just wants to relax and enjoy a little gratification now and again.<sup>723</sup>

Indeed, Bayless states that “to introduce a woman into a narrative is to invite the comic” for “women are the engine of this world.”<sup>724</sup> This kind of comic utopia is

a virtual world where women have power, appetites, and enjoyment—and men sympathize with them. Men are brought face to face with the truth that women represent humankind.<sup>725</sup>

“This,” she concludes, “is the genuine radicality of comic narrative.”<sup>726</sup>

Modern satire may offer the female writer a similar sense of shared humanity. Since only members of a club are allowed to ridicule it, satire presupposes a deep sense of social and cultural participation.<sup>727</sup> As a form of socio-cultural critique, it “testifies to the fallibility of its author, who engagingly shows he [or she] is one of us, a part of imperfect humanity.”<sup>728</sup> Indeed, satire “requires the inclusion, not the exclusion, of human failing.”<sup>729</sup> In participating in this genre, the female writer includes herself in humanity, in society, in culture. She admits her true imperfections while simultaneously eluding the undue and inordinate imperfections heaped on her by the male satirist’s pen. Historically, this “people’s court of blame and shame” has been off-limits to women, or extremely problematic for female authors to take part in, since it routinely blamed and shamed their sex.<sup>730</sup> The right to observe and criticise culture was simply considered a ‘manly’ gesture.<sup>731</sup> Likewise, Alice Sheppard observes,

[t]he comic page, the comedy club, and the great humor novel are all assumed the province of men. And yet these are the channels by

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<sup>723</sup> Bayless, “Is the Comic World a Paradise for Women?,” 42.

<sup>724</sup> *Ibid.*, 42, 43.

<sup>725</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>726</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>727</sup> Künzel, “The Most Dangerous Presumption,” 51.

<sup>728</sup> Pavlovskis-Petit, “Irony & Satire,” 50.

<sup>729</sup> Quintero, “Introduction: Understanding Satire,” 2.

<sup>730</sup> Quintero, “Introduction: Understanding Satire,” 2; Kairoff, “Gendering Satire: Behn to Burney,” 277.

<sup>731</sup> Kairoff, “Gendering Satire: Behn to Burney,” 276.

which humor as a corrective serves to challenge politics, policies and underlying social realities.<sup>732</sup>

It is imperative that women, as well as other marginalised groups, have access to these channels of political power and change. In this thesis, I have concentrated on one small piece of a much larger puzzle. I have sought to illustrate how a deeper understanding and appreciation of female humour and comedy might make sense of Spark's strange world and the feminist messages at its core. Building this kind of acceptance and understanding of female humour practices and feminist literary comedies helps us to embrace the contributions and possible improvements of this major contingent of humanity. It re-gifts this female contingent their oft-withheld membership in the club of humanity. For humour "perhaps more than other social measures, is a subtle indicator of the status of a subgroup. When the dominant group is ready to laugh at one's jokes, then one is a member of society."<sup>733</sup> When we all fully understand the joke behind Spark's comedy, and the comedy of her literary sisters, Woman will become liberated from those perfect and imperfect literary myths of her and from comedy's past disparagement and marginalisation. The "club" of humanity will be redefined along more inclusive lines. And women will become, simply and inclusively, human.

With the open, dislocated conclusion of *Robinson*, Spark activates an idea of the future without fixing it in place. The future, for her, remains unwritten, multiple, open to possibility, a creation, even, of her reader's imagination. Comedy offers the reader agency in the creation of meaning and Spark delivers plenty of possible options. Often viewed as an inevitable textual flaw of an author new to novel-writing, I have, in this chapter, reframed the various interpretative possibilities posed by

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<sup>732</sup> Sheppard, "Continuity and Change," 13.

<sup>733</sup> Ibid., 14.

*Robinson* as a strength rather than a weakness, a feminist strategy that allies Spark with many of her fellow female writers. Little and DuPlessis both advance comprehensive feminist theories that detail how women writers have addressed the problem of closed conclusions either through interrupting or trespassing beyond the time-honoured cycle of beginning-middle-end. Spark's text contains many of the markers of these disobedient strategies in which liminality becomes a permanent rather than provisional state. In Little's view, this permanent liminal state allows for the creation of new myths, motifs, norms and institutions. In DuPlessis' view, it enables the creation of a new, constantly transitioning person, one who anticipates an alternative future of sexual and gender fluidity. January, as a multiple person, and Miguel, as a new prototype of man, offer hope for the future of womankind and mankind. Hope also lies, for woman, in the comic form itself. In this world, she can be heard, she can triumph and influence. In this almost-utopia, she can seize the opportunity to open and change minds. With *Robinson*, Spark evokes but never delivers on the conventions of the utopian genre, instead depicting the world "as is", as a core reality from which human beings cannot escape. Wherever we go, we take it with us. So change, if it is to occur, must take place within the far more infinite territory of the mind. Available to all who choose to venture into it, the mind is the site of expansion, change and possibility in which comedy works and plays.

## CONCLUSION

Whether real or imaginary, the island culture that aspires to complete and closed insularity is always a doomed one.<sup>734</sup> The final glance Spark gives her reader of Robinson is through January's eyes as she pictures him "warily moving his possessions on to some boat bound for some other isolation".<sup>735</sup> His island has begun to sink, its not so stable boundaries lapped up by the rising ocean. In chapter 1 of this thesis, I looked briefly at islands as sites of difference and possibility. Constituted through the outside, these sites must necessarily be open to difference. Drawing on Deleuze and Derrida, Stewart Williams considers the island as an exemplification of "becoming-other".<sup>736</sup> This relationship between the self and the Other, he writes, is critical to both the constitution of identity and the creation of the possibilities that the other represents.<sup>737</sup> For Williams, islands are one of three impossible places that require an ethical response, a threshold or passageway that precedes the possibility of a judgement or decision.<sup>738</sup> This gateway of the possible confirms the "impossibility of attaining any insularity or closure around various entities of subjectivity and community", implying in fact "the necessary inverse in their openness to the other".<sup>739</sup> Robinson's reaction to encountering the female Other in January is to close to difference and all the possibilities it brings, firstly by intensifying his control and secondly by fleeing. January's response to an inflated masculine Other in Robinson's world of man is to resist all, even seemingly benign,

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<sup>734</sup> Baldacchino, "Editorial: Islands," 249.

<sup>735</sup> Spark, *Robinson*, 175.

<sup>736</sup> Williams, "Virtually Impossible," 219.

<sup>737</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>738</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

<sup>739</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

attempts at erasure, violation and colonisation. But the world of Robinson is also one of these impossible island places, a liminal landscape, a transitional training ground that requires some sort of ethical response from Spark's heroine. Part of January's response is, quite literally, to become Other, to take on the traits of masculinity when it serves her, to embrace this aspect of her multiple, mutable identity. Spark's heroine celebrates femininity and female culture but remains open to the Other and to alternative expressions of sex and gender. This openness, this combining and conflating of different gender identities, is part of her growth into an independent adult woman and fully actualised artist.

With *Robinson*, Spark invites her reader to see the world with a mind that is, like her heroine's, open, fluid and eternally, critically amused. She invites her reader to witness a journey of personal and cultural transformation – and to begin their own. While most scholars agree on the overarching aim of feminist comedy, some doubt its effectiveness in bringing about true sociocultural change. Purdie finds it unlikely that any kind of comedy might radically alter audience perception since, as a form, it affirms masculine dominance and confirms what is already known.<sup>740</sup> Wilt agrees on its limitations, writing that comedy “is an archetypal carrier of anger, up to a point, the traditional protection against pain, up to a point.”<sup>741</sup> Ultimately, though, when engaging in comedy, a woman might wish she “could count more securely on a man's sense of humor.”<sup>742</sup> Even some female comic writers working with the form were aware of “the limits of its effectiveness in forwarding change.”<sup>743</sup> Margaret Stetz suggests that their scepticism about the potential positive impact of comedy may have been in part due to wariness of a form that historically targeted and humiliated

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<sup>740</sup> Purdie, *Comedy: The Master of Discourse*, 147.

<sup>741</sup> Wilt, “The Laughter of Maidens, the Cackle of Matriarchs,” 192.

<sup>742</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>743</sup> Margaret D. Stetz, *British Women's Comic Fiction, 1890-1990: Not Drowning, But Laughing* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2001), 2.



them.<sup>744</sup> Since it first presented to them as a problematic genre, she writes, women writers have “continued to see laughter in all its guises, from scathing mockery to mere wry smiles, as a problem requiring careful scrutiny.”<sup>745</sup>

Such scepticism is, however, only indicative of women’s relationship with the masculine tradition of comedy. Women’s relationship with their own tradition has been complicated by the fact that, Barreca points out, they may not even “recognize their own humor at first glance because they have, since infancy in most cases, been initiated into the world held tight by masculine humor.”<sup>746</sup> It is vitally important, she believes, that women “recognize fully that we have always had a joke of our own”.<sup>747</sup> According to Crawford, such recognition may simply entail women looking at the world around them, since

[f]or women, there are very many jokes embedded in the social structure. The Big Joke is not only that women are second-class citizens but *that their subordination is culturally represented as apolitical, natural, or even as privilege*.<sup>748</sup>

This statement suggests that the female experience and a humorous outlook are in fact a rather natural fit. After all,

[t]he general rule cross-culturally is that any behavior or task that is low status is assigned to women (and any task assigned to women becomes low status). Humor should be the speciality of women. Just as women have been allowed to specialize in the devalued forms of visual art [...], writing (diaries and domestic novels), and the low status, underpaid work of industrialized countries [...], women should get assigned that most trivial, low-status form of creativity, spontaneous humor.”<sup>749</sup>

Similarly, Lisa Merrill writes that many contemporary female historians now consider comedy an ancient female form, then asks, “if tragic form is associated with a specifically male psychological experience, might comedy be an affirmation of

<sup>744</sup> Stetz, *British Women’s Comic Fiction*, 12.

<sup>745</sup> Ibid.

<sup>746</sup> Barreca, “‘Untamed and Unabashed’,” 17.

<sup>747</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>748</sup> Crawford, “On Conversational Humor,” 21.

<sup>749</sup> Ibid.

female experience?”.<sup>750</sup> For her, the “special relationship between female experience and the comedic voice” is cemented by the constructive nature of comedy in attaining gender equality.<sup>751</sup> “Because,” she adds,

humor depends upon a perception of events or behavior as unexpected or incongruous, the individual who publically points up such inconsistencies risks making a statement about the status quo. Consequently, satire, irony and comedy pointedly directed can wield enormous social and political power.<sup>752</sup>

As such, comedy can help us as a culture to “test or figure out what it means to say ‘us’.”<sup>753</sup>

Comedy might therefore be said to sit on the cusp of who we are – individually and collectively – and who we could be. Feminist comedy frequently focuses on seeking clarity, inclusivity and change around issues of sex and gender. It is a brand of comedy women writers have been employing for centuries yet it has received little critical attention. In this thesis, I have sought to address this gap with respect to one famously funny author and one understudied text. The various interpretive possibilities of *Robinson* have caused frustration and mystification amongst the few critics who have approached it but I maintain that possibility is the ultimate purpose of Spark’s second, often dismissed novel. While some critics have noted that, with *Robinson*, Spark is working consciously with characteristics typically associated with masculinity and femininity, what the author and text ultimately impart on this subject has likewise been lost in the critical confusion. In the preceding chapters, I have argued that Spark uses multiple comic strategies – parody, satire, paronomasia, caricature, mask, grotesquery, irony, mimicry and literalisation included – to explicitly interrogate power imbalances between the female and male, the feminine and

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<sup>750</sup> Merrill, “Feminist Humor,” 272.

<sup>751</sup> Ibid., 271.

<sup>752</sup> Ibid., 272.

<sup>753</sup> Berlant and Ngai, “Comedy Has Issues,” 235.

masculine, and to implicitly critique all power structures that foster unchanging and unquestioned gender inequality. As such, Spark's novel sits comfortably on a continuum of female comic literature that strives to liberate women through the subversive power of laughter. Like much of this overlooked literature, *Robinson* does not disrupt literary and cultural structures of power in order to seek reversal or revenge. The purpose of such disruption is instead to open up a space in which new voices, ideas and meanings might enter and improve the collective cultural consciousness. Ultimately, it aims to do nothing more (or less) than open minds to new ways of reading, writing, thinking and being.

*Robinson* emerges from this analysis as a profoundly feminist text by an author who has created for herself an idiosyncratic brand of feminist comedy. Every brand of feminist comedy is perhaps unique to the author who pens it, as even among authors who identify as feminists, feminism is defined individually and on a wide spectrum.<sup>754</sup> Women's humour is also slippery. It may seem ambiguous, ambivalent or inconsistent since it expresses the dual, competing desires to shake off domination and avoid alienation from men and the dominant culture at large.<sup>755</sup> For Spark, feminism simply meant economic equality.<sup>756</sup> Stannard writes that her Edinburgh upbringing "instilled in her a fundamental feminism and exactness of mind; nevertheless, she was not a 'political' feminist".<sup>757</sup> Feminism is, according to Little, "an active undercurrent" in her work, "although for Spark the issue is most often latent, matter-of-fact, assumed rather than analyzed or professed."<sup>758</sup> As McQuillan points out though, "even an explicit disavowal of feminism does not stop

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<sup>754</sup> Abby H. P. Werlock, introduction to *British Women Writing Fiction*, ed. Abby H. P. Werlock, 3.

<sup>755</sup> Naranjo-Huebl, "From Peek-a-Boo to Sarcasm," para. 12.

<sup>756</sup> Stannard, *Muriel Spark: The Biography*, 434.

<sup>757</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>758</sup> Little, *Comedy and the Woman Writer*, 100.

Spark being female writer in a man's world".<sup>759</sup> Clarifying her form of feminism by becoming an authority on nineteenth-century women writers like Mary Shelley, Alice Meynell and Edith Sitwell, Stannard points out that Spark's

1950s feminism was closer to that of the 1990s than to that of the 1790s (or even of the 1960s). It is the feminism of intellectual and economic partnership in which women are free to indulge in all the conventional manifestations of 'femininity'.<sup>760</sup>

Spark celebrated female strength and wit, along with female style,<sup>761</sup> and spoke against man-hating and sex role reversal.<sup>762</sup> Like many post-feminist humourists would later do,<sup>763</sup> she ridiculed and critiqued the feminist movement itself.<sup>764</sup> But this kind of critical attitude is another characteristic of feminist humour. For even as feminist humourists mock the inflexibility of feminism, they are aiding the articulation of common meanings, the creation of feminist communities and the defining of boundaries around feminist culture.<sup>765</sup> So while second-wave feminism incited a minor flurry of interest in the female comic tradition, the continuation and expansion of investigations in this field may, in return, help better define the values of feminism for feminists of all varieties.

"Feminism," Barreca states, "seems to be increasingly tied to humor."<sup>766</sup> Indeed, feminism and humour have a long association, one that pre-dates the scathing wit of second-wave feminists and the relatively recent study of female comedy. Humour played a prominent role in the early years of the British suffrage movement,<sup>767</sup> as Sophie Blanch writes:

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<sup>759</sup> McQuillan, "Introduction: 'I Don't Know Anything about Freud'," 6.

<sup>760</sup> Stannard, *Muriel Spark: The Biography*, 116, 118.

<sup>761</sup> *Ibid.*, xvii.

<sup>762</sup> *Ibid.*, 434.

<sup>763</sup> Colletta, "Postmodernity and the Gendered Uses of Political Satire," 221.

<sup>764</sup> Stannard, *Muriel Spark: The Biography*, 41, 434.

<sup>765</sup> Crawford, "On Conversational Humor," 26.

<sup>766</sup> Barreca, *They Used to Call Me Snow White*, 185.

<sup>767</sup> Sophie Blanch, "Women and Comedy," in *The History of British Women's Writing, 1920-1945*, ed. Maroula Joannou (Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 113, <https://www.palgrave.com/gp/book/9780230282797>.

Until the introduction of direct action, campaigners for the vote had courted attention largely through appeals to the comic sensibility of their supporters and, notably, the public's desire to laugh at a staid and inflexible political authority. Through satirical commentary, visual and lyrical lampooning, caricature, punning, gendered word-play, specially commissioned comic plays, and ironic stereotyping, of both themselves and their anti-suffrage opponents, large numbers of articulate, well educated women were openly engaged in comic performance and production for political ends.<sup>768</sup>

New Woman novelists joined in this comic production with works that used laughter to inspire change and improvement, without alienating the masculine component of their societies.<sup>769</sup> These laughing women are, however, the least remembered women of the Victorian period.<sup>770</sup> New Woman novelists who employed the comic mode, Stetz writes, "are the most forgotten among the forgotten, their jests at the expense of patriarchal ideologies and institutions lost to readers today, and even to most feminist scholars."<sup>771</sup> It is this forgotten history or "invisible tradition" that Audrey Bilger seeks to recover when studying eighteenth-century British women writers "smuggling feminism into their novels" via comedy.<sup>772</sup> It is not, however, simply the twentieth-century female comic tradition of Spark and her ilk, the nineteenth-century female comic tradition of the New Woman novelists or the eighteenth-century female comic tradition of Mary Wollstonecraft, Maria Edgeworth, Fanny Burney and Jane Austen that require consideration. Feminist scholars have long expressed "the need to chart, not to invent or create, a tradition of women's humor."<sup>773</sup> For, as Barreca insists, it is "the inability of the critical tradition to deal with comedy by women, rather than the inability of women to produce comedy, that accounts for the shortage of critical material on the subject."<sup>774</sup>

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<sup>768</sup> Blanch, "Women and Comedy," 113.

<sup>769</sup> Stetz, *British Women's Comic Fiction*, 9.

<sup>770</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>771</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>772</sup> Bilger, *Laughing Feminism*, 11.

<sup>773</sup> Barreca, "'Untamed and Unabashed'," 15.

<sup>774</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

Beyond the charting of this invisible tradition, it is imperative that future criticism include, not just a re-evaluation of comic texts written by women, but of the comic canon itself. Anna Foka writes that women who “deviate from pervasive norms of femininity and into the sphere of comedy have more or less always populated the pages of literary works in disparate societies and cultures and historical eras.”<sup>775</sup> This female comic figure is far from a recent feminist phenomenon, though recent feminist criticism has provided tools that enable scholars to reconsider how “older interpretations suffer from historically restricted assumptions [that are] the outcome of adopting hierarchically stratified categories of analysis.”<sup>776</sup> With this, she introduces a book that studies gender and humour in texts from the classical Greek, Byzantine and medieval eras. Gail Finney, introducing a book that places male humourists and scholars alongside their female cohort, believes that we should speak of gender and humour rather than women and humour, and that future scholarship should view “women’s comedy as existing on an equal footing with men’s rather than in a subcategory.”<sup>777</sup> She notes also that an “advantage of the concept of ‘feminist comedy’ is that it is not gender-specific; it can be created by men as well as women.”<sup>778</sup> Bing likewise indicates an interesting avenue of growth when suggesting that, in challenging “the assumption that males should always be central and females peripheral”, feminist humourists could learn from the more female focus of lesbian humourists.<sup>779</sup> It is, therefore, not only comic traditions and individual female comic writers that we need to revisit and reconsider, but the language and tools of analysis that we use in approaching them.

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<sup>775</sup> Anna Foka, introduction to *Laughter, Humor, and the (Un)Making of Gender*, eds. Anna Foka and Jonas Liliequist, 8.

<sup>776</sup> Ibid.

<sup>777</sup> Finney, “Unity in Difference?,” 5, 12.

<sup>778</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>779</sup> Bing, “Is Feminist Humor an Oxymoron?,” 30.

Future directions in terms of Sparkian studies might include a fresh look, using the sort of updated tools this thesis has attempted to model, at another or a wider selection of her twenty-two novels. Her short stories, plays and poetry might also be included in any forthcoming investigations into her comedy. Less criticism has focused on the creation of literary comedy by British women than by American women.<sup>780</sup> And though many of the insights on the American humour tradition apply to other writers working in the Western tradition, it may be interesting to discover and compare any differences or idiosyncrasies. Spark is, as Abby Werlock points out, among many female British writers who identify as cultural “outsiders, people writing on the margins.”<sup>781</sup> Spark’s heroines, like her and like January, are often borderland women, exiles of willed isolation.<sup>782</sup> Just as Spark’s fiction developed and altered during her prolific fifty-year career as a novelist, so did the composition of her exiled, writerly heroines. Tracking these changes of style and characterisation as Spark continued to play with and within the comic form would no doubt lead to a deeper understanding of this author’s feminism, of her comedy and of her entire oeuvre.

The original intention of this thesis was to perform some of this work. It began as an examination of feminist comedy in the works of three women writers spanning the twentieth century. In reviewing criticism on Spark, however, it became clear just how overlooked and/or misunderstood this aspect of her work was. I soon narrowed my focus to three of her novels, chosen from three different phases of her career. It was only when I began writing on *Robinson* that I truly discovered the nature, range and profundity of Spark’s feminist comedy. So much about this brief but dense, entertaining but baffling novel had been left unsaid and underexplored by mainstream criticism. Some remains unsaid. But a great deal, I hope, has been

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<sup>780</sup> Blanch, “Women and Comedy,” 112–13.

<sup>781</sup> Werlock, introduction to *British Women Writing Fiction*, 2.

<sup>782</sup> Stannard, *Muriel Spark: The Biography*, 67, 267.

clarified. As the previous chapters have explicated, with *Robinson*, Spark creates a world of the Other, a closed structure shaped by masculine methods, beliefs and language. Humour helps January Marlow in her quest to resist masculine attempts at colonisation, to challenge male ownership of language and, ultimately, to claim her right to write. In the end, Spark's heroine wins, not superiority, but liberty – the liberty to self-define, to transform her identity from that which is prescribed to that which is chosen. This is the liberty that the comic heroine has always sought, throughout her long but suppressed literary life. It is the same liberty that many women of diverse experiences, personalities and outlooks continue to seek today.

It is hardly surprising that women have sought liberty in the subversive spheres of literary comedy and verbal humour. For wherever there is a comedic discourse or humorous exchange, issues of power, control, pleasure, agency, aggression and difference are being enacted. Comedy and humour routinely expose entrenched attitudes, culturally endorsed biases and institutionalised hypocrisies. Indeed, comedy remains one of the least universal, most gendered forms of communication we engage in.<sup>783</sup> It is also one of the most hotly contested. As Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai note, no other genre incites the same level of fierce intensity as comedy does when warring factions attempt to define its boundaries.<sup>784</sup> What is and is not funny is so subjective that to disrespect someone's humour becomes personally "shaming" and "diminishing".<sup>785</sup> Berlant and Ngai suggest that we hold our pleasures closer than our ethics and that any contestation to the spontaneity of our humour is viewed as an interference with our core freedoms.<sup>786</sup> This may explain some of the rage aimed at feminism and other forms of "political

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<sup>783</sup> Caliskan, "Is There Such a Thing as Women's Humor?," 53.

<sup>784</sup> Berlant and Ngai, "Comedy Has Issues," 242.

<sup>785</sup> Ibid.

<sup>786</sup> Ibid.



correctness” that obstruct people’s comic impulses and pleasures.<sup>787</sup> At the same time, the female comic writer or female humourist is in the pleasure-making business – bestowing it, revoking it, flirting with it, experiencing it.<sup>788</sup> In creating comedy, the female comic writer defies the silent, passive, ignorant role prescribed to her by patriarchal cultures. She inverts binaries, unsettles hierarchies and transgresses boundaries. She tests reality and adjusts perspectives, inviting those with the central perspective to view the world – laugh at the world – from a perspective they have never needed to adopt or value before. She voices her opinion, not from a privileged height but from the margins to which she has been banished for centuries. She brings her marginal perspective into the centre of a narrative, laughing at any person or civilisation that might attempt to silence or control her. She invites attention, boldly claiming a position of authority that is usually denied her. She refutes the notion of universal perspective and permits the possibility of other marginalised voices and perspectives. She provokes change, conversation and polyphony, encouraging a sociocultural shift towards multiplicity. And she achieves all this merely by picking up her pen and telling a joke.

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<sup>787</sup> Berlant and Ngai, “Comedy Has Issues,” 241.

<sup>788</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

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